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Artful Scares: A24 and the Elevated Horror Cycle

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Artful Scares: A24 and the Elevated Horror Cycle

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Onward and upward!

Abstract

Artful Scares: A24 and the Elevated Horror Cycle

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One notable cycle of production in horror cinema in the 2010s was so-called "elevated horror." The independent company A24 has contributed heavily to this cycle. This project argues that A24 employs the aesthetic of elevated horror as part of its house style. One of A24's major corporate mandates is to "bridge the gap" between the art-house and the multiplex. Thus, it works to market its films to both the art-house cinephile audience and the casual, mainstream cinemagoer. This thesis examines the marketing, branding, and distribution strategies underlying A24's pursuit of its target markets, focusing specifically on the company's horror products. Using the films *Under the Skin* (d. Glazer, 2013), *The Witch* (d. Eggers, 2016), and *Midsommar* (d. Aster, 2019) as case studies, the thesis presents these strategies at pivotal moments in the company's development from a newcomer to a notable player in American independent cinema. In doing so, I present the parallel histories of A24 and the elevated horror cycle and provide evidence for an interdependence between the two. The project has a particular emphasis on the narrative, stylistic, and generic components of elevated horror film texts; the marketing, distribution, and branding practices of A24; and the discourses of critical reception regarding the elevated horror cycle which circulated in the popular and trade presses.

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Introduction: House Styles and Horror Cycles

One of the most prominent genre cycles of the 2010s was so-called "elevated horror" films, or what is sometimes referred to as "prestige horror," "art-house horror," and "post-horror." The independent studio A24 has contributed the largest number of films to this cycle, and, as I will argue in this project, the company has strategically deployed these elevated horror films as part of its house style. A24, which launched in the summer of 2012, has released a number of high-profile films which have been categorized as part of the elevated horror trend—*Under the Skin* (d. Glazer, 2013), *The Witch* (d. Eggers, 2016), *It Comes at Night* (d. Shults, 2017), *Hereditary* (d. Aster, 2018), *Midsommar* (d. Aster, 2019), and *The Lighthouse* (d. Eggers, 2019).

Both the elevated horror trend and A24 have received little attention in the academy. David Church's recent book, *Post-horror: Art, Genre, and Cultural Elevation* (2021), is the first major study of the trend. Church's work looks at the major themes of elevated horror (e.g., grief, trauma, gaslighting, familial inheritance) through analyses of case study films. By focusing on one independent studio and its impact on elevated horror, I wish to build on Church's initial analysis by looking at the industrial practices which have allowed elevated horror to become a fixture of contemporary horror cinema. As such, my primary research question is as follows: In what ways have A24's distribution, marketing, and branding practices impacted the elevated horror cycle? In addition, by identifying the elevated horror trend as a distinct genre cycle, I wish to

illustrate a coherent set of stylistic and narrative commonalities which define elevated horror.

GENRE CYCLES IN HORROR CINEMA

Leger Grindon defines a generic cycle as "a series of genre films produced during a limited period of time and linked by a dominant trend in their use of the genre's conventions" (2011, pp. 44). Cycles trace the evolution of genre by periodizing significant phases in a genre's history. The study of genre cycles explores the industrial and cultural factors that influence trend shifts within a genre (Grindon, 2011, pp. 45). As Amanda Ann Klein argues, the cycle model's "focus on cinema's use value—the way that filmmakers, audiences, film reviewers, advertisements, and cultural discourses interact with and affect the film text—offers a more pragmatic, localized approach to genre history" (2011, pp. 5). This approach sees genre as being directly affected by the environments in which its texts are produced and consumed. Cycles are commodities (Klein, 2011, pp. 8), as such they illustrate how the industry uses genre to appeal to shifting audience desires. As I argue below, the emergence of elevated horror films in the mid-2010s was an industrial response to trend shifts occurring in the horror genre in the decade previous. The elevated horror cycle is one logical progression from the dominant horror cycle that manifested in the 2000s, the neo-grindhouse cycle. Elevated horror signaled a pivot away from certain aesthetic and narrative tendencies which, by the end of the decade, had fallen out of favor with audiences.

Genres develop through a multi-faceted relationship between filmmakers, the industry, and the moviegoing audience. As Thomas Schatz makes clear, film genres are constructed through the repetition of narrative and thematic elements. This repetition "is generated by the interaction of the studios and the mass audience, and it [is] sustained so long as it satisfies the needs and expectations of the audience and remains financially viable for the studios" (Schatz, 1981, pp. 10-11). Cycles, too, develop as part of this dynamic between industry and audience. Klein argues that cycles exist as financial schemes which the studios can manipulate based on audience response. Film cycles are "dependent on audience desires" and thus are "subject to defined time constraints" (2011, pp. 4). As cycles wane in financial viability due to declining audience demand for that cycle's content, they must "be updated or altered in order to continue to turn a profit" or else phase out of existence (Klein, 2011, pp. 4).

Cycle studies is useful in the case of horror cinema, as the genre has maintained relative success and longevity through studios course correcting in their use of horror's generic traits. Of all the genres, horror is perhaps the easiest to trace historically using cycle studies, as cycles in horror tend to respond to or be in conversation with horror cycles of the past. For example, the repetitive narratives of films in the slasher cycle that peaked in the 1980s gave way to more self-aware and self-reflexive films like *Scream* (d. Craven, 1996), films which openly comment on and deconstruct the characteristics of slasher films.[1] Another reason cycle studies is apt when looking at horror is that horror

[1] *Scream* was by no means the first horror film to deconstruct the genre, but its massive success correlated in an influx of self-reflexive horror cinema.

cinema has progressed through recognizable cycles of production since as early as the silent era.

These early horror cycles were defined, in whole or in part, by the house styles of specific studios. These house styles were most coherent in the classical era, where the major studios "developed a repertoire of contract stars and story formulas that were refined and continually recirculated through the marketplace" (Schatz, 1988/2010, p. 7). Each studio had their stock-in-trade genres, which served the dual purpose of providing an efficiency in production and giving studios a recognizable brand identity (Schatz, 1988/2010, p. 7). Warner Bros. had musicals and gangster pictures, MGM had glossy prestige films, and Universal had the monster movie. The Universal horror films of the 1930s-1940s were themselves influenced by the German Expressionist cinema of UFA, particularly in the use of low-key lighting. Former UFA filmmakers Joe May and Karl Freund came to Universal after emigrating to the United States and helped establish this style. Universal's horror output in the early 1930s helped cut costs and limited the negative economic impact of the Great Depression on the studio (Edwards, 2014, p. 20). This allowed the studio, which did not have the financial boon of owning a theater chain, to remain competitive with the majors.

In an attempt to rival Universal's horror output in the 1940s, RKO hired Val Lewton to create its horror unit. A former pulp fiction writer and employee of independent producer David O. Selznick, Lewton produced 11 films for RKO in a four-year span. These were low-budget horror films such as *Cat People* (d. Tourneur, 1942) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (d. Tourneur, 1943) which proved modestly successful, and

they have been championed in retrospect for having a distinctive "dreamy" atmosphere and "pathos-filled moments" (Nemerov, 2019). Jacques Tourneur, who directed three films for Lewton at RKO, said that the producer had an idealism which brought a certain poeticism to his films (The Criterion Collection, 2016). This pathos and idealism which Lewton brought to RKO's production cycle of horror films was distinct from competitors like Universal, whose films were steeped in expressionistic and Gothic influences.

House styles revolving around horror production were evident outside of the Hollywood majors as well. Hammer Films made a name for itself with its own brand of Gothic horror and a stable of stars that included Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing. In the 1950s, American International Pictures (AIP), which courted the "19 year old male" market with titillating genre B-pictures (Davis, 2012, p. 108), introduced the Roger Corman school of low-budget, quickly produced exploitation cinema. Bob Shaye's New Line Cinema was financially bolstered through the 1980s by *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, a crucial franchise in the slasher cycle. Meanwhile, one of New Line's major competitors, Miramax, was "performing a balancing act" of sorts when it came to the branding of its genre division Dimension in the early 1990s (Perren, 2012, p. 132). The company was at once using the prestige associated with its mainline Miramax brand to market their Dimension properties as higher quality than B-pictures and distancing the Miramax and Dimension brands to avoid tarnishing the Miramax name with perceived lowbrow genre films (Perren, 2012, p. 132).

In the 2000s, a prominent feature of Lionsgate's output was violent, "hard-R" horror films. This house style emerged with *American Psycho* (d. Harron, 2000), and it

factored heavily into the marketing of the company's massively successful *Saw* franchise. The success of *Saw* (d. Wan, 2004) gave rise to the dominant horror cycle of the 2000s, what Sarah Wharton refers to as the "neo grindhouse" (2013, pp. 198). The neo-grindhouse cycle encompasses horror films from the 2000s which are characterized by their explicit depictions of violence and sex—this includes so-called "torture porn" films, hyperviolent slasher remakes, and films that pay homage to the violent exploitation films of the past like *Grindhouse* (d. Rodriguez and Tarantino, 2007) and *House of 1000 Corpses* (d. Zombie, 2003).

Saw was a surprise hit for Lionsgate, grossing $103 million on a $1.2 million budget.[2] *Saw II* (d. Bousman, 2005) and *Saw III* (d. Bousman, 2006) each out-grossed its immediate predecessor. Subsequent sequels saw a decline in revenue, save for *Saw 3D* (d. Greutert, 2010), which likely benefitted from being billed as "The Final Chapter" in the series. Nevertheless, by the end of the decade the mainstream appeal of the franchise had faded. Despite attempts to revive the franchise in the 2010s—Lionsgate's week-long re-release of *Saw* in 2014 grossed less than $1 million, and their return to the franchise in 2017, *Jigsaw* (d. Spierig and Spierig), is the third-lowest grossing entry in the series—it was clear that audiences were looking for something different in horror cinema.

Arguably, two major trends marked the shift away from the neo-grindhouse cycle. The first involved major studios attempting to create blockbuster franchises out of horror properties. Beginning in the late-2000s with Paramount's box office successes

[2] Unless otherwise stated, all production budgets and box office information are sourced from The Numbers (https://the-numbers.com), and box office figures reflect worldwide grosses.

Cloverfield (d. Reeves, 2008) and *Paranormal Activity* (d. Peli, 2009),[3] these franchises pivoted away from the hyperviolence of the neo-grindhouse in favor of more tame and tasteful scares. Paramount and Warner Bros., in particular, found financial success from this shift, with Warners generating a blockbuster cinematic universe out of its hit film *The Conjuring* (d. Wan, 2013). Universal, too, put resources into rebooting its stable of "Universal monsters" in the hopes of finding blockbuster success. Its 2017 reimagining of *The Mummy* was both a critical flop and a box office disappointment,[4] and Universal subsequently retooled its "Dark Universe" slate. This resulted in *The Invisible Man* (d. Whannell, 2020), a significantly lower-budget film than *The Mummy* which managed to turn a healthy profit ($134 million off a reported $7 million budget) despite being released at a time when theaters worldwide were beginning to shutter due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The second major trend, elevated horror, contrasted the neo-grindhouse by using a more art-house aesthetic: cutting less frequently, using more wide shots, using more realistic color grading, etc. These films were also markedly less violent than the neo-grindhouse, focusing instead on atmosphere and character psychology to produce the intended horror effect.[5] By the same token, the elevated horror cycle functioned as counter-programming to the blockbuster horror franchises mentioned above. Major

[3] These films were coming at the tail-end of a cycle of "found footage" horror which launched after the massive success of *The Blair Witch Project* (d. Myrick and Sanchez) in 1999, and which fell out of favor after multiple poorly received films such as *The Devil Inside* (d. Brent Bell, 2012).

[4] This was a particularly notable failure when compared to Universal's 1999 *The Mummy* (d. Sommers), which was very profitable and spawned two sequels and a spinoff film.

[5] Most elevated horror films do contain violent sequences, but these are much more restrained than the set pieces of the hyperviolent neo-grindhouse films.

studios have released a small number of films that could be considered part of the corpus of elevated horror—Universal distributed Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017) and Paramount distributed Alex Garland's *Annihilation* (2018) in the United States. However, the narrative and stylistic characteristics of elevated horror stand in contrast to most of the horror released by the major studios. Generally speaking, elevated horror films tend to present themselves as containing more serious, thematically rich material than that of blockbuster cinema.

Some journalists in the popular press deny that elevated horror films are connected by common narrative or stylistic traits (Ehrlich, 2019; Nicholson, 2019). However, I argue that there are a set of shared traits which these elevated horror films display, and these traits comprise the house style of A24's horror product. These traits include an emphasis on shot composition and an atmospheric mood over the traditional "jump scare" mechanics common of major studio horror; a reliance on psychological states instead of, or in conjunction with, traditional horror monstrosity; deliberate pacing that gives way to a more rapidly paced (and oftentimes more violent) climax; discordant musical scores; and the use of visual symmetry and slow camera movement. Films in the elevated horror category employ some, if not all, of these traits. Elevated horror films also tend to be genre hybrids, blending the elevated horror aesthetic with traditional horror conventions as well as elements from genres other than horror (e.g., family drama, psychological thriller, science fiction).

Clearly, there were horror films released prior to the 2010s which contain similar aesthetic qualities to the elevated horror cycle. *Rosemary's Baby* (d. Polanski, 1968),

which is often cited as a significant precursor to these contemporary prestige horror films (Franich, 2015; Bui, 2018; Bradley, 2019), contains similar narrative preoccupations involving deliberate pacing and psychological horror. One could also make comparisons to films like *Don't Look Now* (d. Roeg, 1973), *Images* (d. Altman, 1972), and *The Exorcist* (d. Friedkin, 1973), among others. In fact, a few significant developments that were occurring in Hollywood during the period in which these films were being released fostered an environment in which elevated horror could be produced. The emergence of the New Hollywood coincided with more director-driven product, which allowed for more narrative experimentation (Schatz, 2009, pp. 161-162). And the development of the MPAA ratings system, one year prior to *Rosemary's Baby*, correlated with Hollywood embracing more suggestive content (Schatz, 2009, pp. 162). What makes the elevated horror films of the 2010s unique from these earlier films is that the journalistic discourse has grouped these films into a distinct category. I argue that this delineation of certain 2010s horror films as being "elevated" indicates that a cycle has developed around the trend.

This project examines the elevated horror cycle from an industry studies perspective using a combination of textual analysis, discourse analysis, and reception studies. Through this multi-faceted analysis of three case study films—*Under the Skin*, *The Witch*, and *Midsommar*—I illustrate how the characteristics of elevated horror manifest in A24 horror and how they are emblematic of the company's house style. Looking at the films along with A24's marketing materials for them further demonstrates how genre is used to sell elevated horror to mainstream moviegoers. There are

discrepancies between how genre functions within the films and how genre is presented in the films' marketing This is a key recurring component of A24's distribution strategy which sells elevated horror in a specific, mainstream fashion.

Using discourse analysis of relevant trade and popular press publications, as well as a critical reception study on each case study film, I assess the extent to which A24 has influenced the popularization of the elevated horror trend. For this analysis, I used *The Hollywood Reporter*, *Variety*, and *Deadline* to trace how the trades reported on A24 from its launch in 2012. I also looked at the various profiles written about the company by press outlets such as *The Los Angeles Times*, *Vanity Fair*, and *GQ*—articles which propped A24 up as a dominant new player in American independent cinema. These outlets, alongside articles written in the independent film blog *IndieWire* and reviews from major publications (e.g., *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Atlantic*, *Chicago Tribune*), allow me to situate A24 horror films within the larger discursive context of contemporary horror cinema. Specifically, these critics' reviews show how the company's horror films were consistently met with critical plaudits, even as some of those critics were vocally opposed to the elevated horror trend.

THE EMERGENCE OF ELEVATED HORROR

The remainder of this chapter briefly outlines the significant releases in the elevated horror cycle. Doing so illustrates how a handful of independent films that were financial and/or critical successes led to replication of the elevated horror format. This replication occurred, occasionally, at the level of major studio releases, but these releases

were rarely successful at the box office. In most cases, elevated horror found a niche audience through independent studios distributing films in specialty release with a longer life on streaming platforms. As this project contends, A24 is notable for how it diverged from this model. A24 distributed its elevated horror properties in wide theatrical release in an attempt to expand the audience for the cycle.

Before proceeding with this history, we should note the extent to which these cycles of horror, and genre cycles more generally, are situated within national boundaries. The neo-grindhouse cycle, and "torture porn" more specifically, has been discussed in the context of post-9/11 America. Matt Hills, for one example, has written about how the *Saw* franchise provides indirect symbolism of "righteous torture" in the face of debates over the legality of torture during the George W. Bush administration (2011, pp. 107-123). Readings like this tie the neo-grindhouse specifically to contexts of American society after 2001. Similar trends of hyperviolent exploitation films that intersect with the timeline of the neo-grindhouse occurred in non-American entertainment industries prior to 9/11. A cycle of transgressive art-house cinema with exploitation and horror influences, what James Quandt coined the New French Extremity (2004), began in the mid-1990s and continued through the 2000s.[6] Select films coming out of Japan—the *Guinea Pig* series (1985-1990), the *Tetsuo* trilogy (d. Tsukamoto, 1989-2009), *Audition* (d. Miike, 1999), *Battle Royale* (d. Fukasaku, 2000), and *Ichi the Killer* (d. Miike, 2001), among others—also pushed the boundaries of excessive violence in exploitation cinema

[6] Films of the New French Extremity include *Sombre* (d. Grandrieux, 1998), *Criminal Lovers* (d. Ozon, 1999), *Trouble Every Day* (d. Denis, 2001), *Irréversible* (d. Noe, 2002), *Twentynine Palms* (d. Dumont, 2003), *Frontiere(s)* (d. Gens, 2007), *Haute Tension* (d. Aja, 2003), and *Martyrs* (d. Laugier, 2008).

from the late 1980s into the early 2000s. Still, Wharton and others view the neo-grindhouse cycle through the lens of post-9/11 Hollywood. While this can be a limiting approach to viewing genre, given how globalized the film industry has become, it is somewhat fundamental to cycle studies. Given that a cycle is defined by the interactions between an industry and its audience, it is difficult to categorize a cycle that is not confined to a single nation's entertainment industry. Although Wharton labels certain non-American films as neo-grindhouse, such as the Canadian film *Hobo with a Shotgun* (d. Eisener, 2011) and the Australian-American *Rogue* (d. McLean, 2007), the cycle is viewed as primarily a product of American independent cinema (Wharton, 2013, pp. 198).

The elevated horror cycle, too, is transnational in terms of its corpus. As this project's case study films were released by a singular U.S. distributor, I will nevertheless focus on how the cycle functions within the American film industry. Tracing the U.S. distribution of elevated horror films, even those produced outside of the U.S., allows for a coherent (if not incomplete) industrial view of the cycle. While I am reticent to dismiss the internationality of some of these films, and future studies could benefit from taking these transnational dimensions into account, isolating the present study to an American film industry perspective allows for a more cohesive analysis.

The Babadook was the first standout film to give visibility to the elevated horror trend. The 2014 film, produced by Screen Australia and distributed in the U.S. by IFC Midnight, was a modest financial success, grossing approximately $7.4 million

worldwide on a $2 million budget. More importantly, it won resounding critical acclaim, with some critics stating that what made the film one of the best horror movies in years were the elements of elevated horror that set it apart from the exploitation horror of the previous decade (Kenny, 2014; Dowd, 2014; Rooney, 2014; Rothkopf, 2014). Trade publications and the popular press fueled the narrative that *The Babadook* was bringing something different and "metaphorically rich" to the horror table (Dowd, 2014). *The Hollywood Reporter* quoted one of the film's producers, Kristina Ceyton, as saying that *The Babadook* was "trying to do more" than franchises like *Saw* (Bulbeck, 2014), and in a *Rolling Stone* interview, director Jennifer Kent stated that her interest in making the film a horror movie had little to do with "things-that-go-bump-in-the-night genre filmmaking" and more to do with the psychology of the film's protagonist (Adams, 2014). Some of the same journalists singing the praises of the film were also setting it apart from the neo-grindhouse, as well as the film's mainstream contemporaries like *Insidious* (d. Wan, 2010) and *The Conjuring* (Rooney, 2014; Kenny, 2014).

Indeed, *The Babadook* looks and feels different than these other films, with its moody atmosphere and lack of traditional scares. Even the film's eponymous monster functions differently than the average horror movie monster, despite its folklore-inflected backstory and shadowy figure which calls to mind distorted, angular imagery from German Expressionism. The Babadook monster presents an externalization of the protagonist's tumultuous internal state, acting as a metaphor for grief and depression. This is not to say that horror cinema of the past has not used its villains as metaphors. Some sci/fi-horror films from the 1950s, for example, used extraterrestrial beings as

stand-ins for the threat of Communism. Toho's Godzilla was symbolic of the effects of nuclear weapons following the events of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Frankenstein's monster, in the 1931 film *Frankenstein* (d. Whale), can be read as a metaphor for the ramifications of science encroaching on the natural realm.[7] Such metaphorical readings had become less commonplace by the turn of the century when the fad of self-reflexive horror sought to look inward on the genre itself rather than outward at the horrors of the real world. The neo-grindhouse, in some ways, carried on this tradition of looking inward, in that the violent extremes of the genre became the attraction, and any social commentary was an inadvertent by-product rather than part of the creative intent.

In March 2015, four months after the U.S release of *The Babadook*, another horror film with a metaphorical monster was released to similar critical praise. *It Follows* was initially planned for a small platform release. Then, after returning unexpectedly high per-screen averages, mostly generated by positive word of mouth, distributor RADiUS-TWC widened the release from 32 to 1,218 theaters (Mendelson, 2015). Again, an elevated horror film was receiving buzz from critics who praised its formalism and themes. *It Follows* presents a stalking, zombie-like monster which is passed from person to person through sex. This monster descends on a group of teenage characters, functioning as a metaphor for the slow, inevitable process of aging that first becomes apparent at the onset of sexual maturity. At the same time that this monster presents an external threat to the characters, it also presents an internal one by representing a

[7] As Paul O'Flinn argues, the 1931 film version radically shifts some key themes of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and effectively waters down the theme of scientific conquest into one of "reactionary moralizing about the dangers of meddling with the unknown" (1983/2002, pp. 109-110).

psychological stress about the impending expiration date for their childhood. This thematic material is complemented by director Mitchell's heightened aesthetic—marked by his use of a slow 360-degree pan—and musician Richard Vreeland's moody, synth-infused score.

After the release of *It Follows*, some journalists were already noticing a trend. Darren Franich at *Entertainment Weekly* wrote a piece in March 2015 which grouped *The Babadook* and *It Follows* together as being part of a nascent horror trend. He recognized it as an explicitly independent phenomenon—major studios would not foray into the elevated horror aesthetic for another few years—in which the combination of low budgets and ambitious directors allowed for innovative twists on one of the most recognizable genres. Without a large body of films to assess, though, Franich could not isolate the formal characteristics which linked these films together. Instead, he grouped the two films in with the trend of "mumblegore" and the television program *The Walking Dead*. One independent company, A24, clearly recognized that elevated horror had growing critical cachet and a viable audience. The company also saw elevated horror as an aesthetic that fit perfectly with their branding as an art-house indie label appealing to a cinephile audience. And it was A24's 2016 film *The Witch* that, arguably, popularized the concept of elevated horror.

The Witch was, at the time of its release, the biggest financial success that A24 had had as a distributor. The company started in 2012 as a small, New York-based outfit that picked up director-driven films from festivals, aiming to release 8-10 films per year (Fernandez, 2012). After making high-profile deals with DirecTV and Amazon in 2013

(Ramachandran and Fritz, 2013; Lewis, 2013), and receiving a $50 million line of credit from Comerica and Union Bank of California in 2014 (McNary, 2014), A24 broke into the prestige film scene at the 2016 Academy Awards. The studio earned seven nominations, and they garnered three wins—Best Actress for Brie Larson in *Room* (d. Abrahamson), Best Documentary Feature for *Amy* (d. Kapadia), and Best Visual Effects for *Ex Machina* (d. Garland). The weekend prior to the Oscar ceremony, *The Witch* debuted theatrically in the U.S. to $8.8 million, on its way to a final worldwide gross of $40 million.

The Witch firmly established the aesthetics that A24 would refine in future horror films, and these aesthetics are the defining characteristics of the elevated horror cycle. With a premise similar to Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*—although the events of *The Witch* take place roughly sixty years prior to the Salem witch trials—Robert Eggers' film taps into the paranoia of superstition, the psychological ramifications of religious persecution, and the inner turmoil of physical isolation. The film contains violent sequences and abject imagery, but most of the horror comes from the psychological trauma caused by a household breaking down from spiteful accusations. Eggers contrasts this narrative of a family falling apart at the seams with a restrained style, relying on slow tracking shots and centered compositions to capture the isolated frontier life of the family. The result is a film with the appearance of a series of portraits depicting the ironic moral degradation of Puritanical life in colonial New England.

A24 would go on to release a number of similar horror films, including Trey Edward Shults' *It Comes at Night* (2017), Ari Aster's films *Hereditary* (2018) and

Midsommar (2019), Eggers' second film *The Lighthouse* (2019), and Rose Glass' *Saint Maud* (2021). By the end of the 2010s, the press came to associate the company with elevated horror. During this time, larger companies started distributing elevated horror films. Early in its foray into media distribution, Amazon co-distributed *The Neon Demon* (d. Nicolas Winding Refn, 2016) with Broad Green Pictures. Amazon Studios gave the film a summer 2016 release in 783 theaters, where it grossed just $3.5 million on a reported $7.5 million budget. Looking solely at these box office numbers, the film was a financial failure, but for a massive tech company like Amazon the losses for distributing a low-budget flop would likely be easily recouped. Moreover, *The Neon Demon* provided a more intangible benefit than box office profits: a film from a well-known auteur filmmaker that could be put exclusively on their online streaming platform. And that is what many of Amazon Studios' first year of titles were. Household names like Spike Lee and Woody Allen, along with directors with art-house credibility like Refn and Kenneth Lonergan, provided Amazon Prime Video with titles which could bring consumers into the fold of Amazon's online shopping infrastructure. While *The Neon Demon* appeared to fail at the box office, it actually provided evidence for the viability of these elevated horror films, and independent film more generally, in the streaming space.

This case for streaming as a potential home for elevated horror was bolstered even more by the release of *Annihilation*. Alex Garland's follow-up to the science fiction thriller *Ex Machina* flopped at the U.S. box office in February 2018, grossing just north of $32 million on a $55 million budget. Prior to this, though, distributor Paramount sold all international rights to the film (outside of the U.S., Canada, and China) to Netflix. Part

of the decision behind this deal involved the increasing difficulty for studios to profit from midbudget films. But the main source of concern that led to the Netflix sale, according to Borys Kit, who broke the story of the sale at *The Hollywood Reporter*, were early test screenings that went poorly due to audience perception that the film was "too intellectual" (Kit, 2017).

Annihilation, I would argue, is part of the elevated horror cycle. It is a science fiction-horror hybrid which features a narrative involving psychological trauma in conjunction with images of monstrosity, deliberate pacing throughout, visual symmetry, and a dominating discordant score during its climax. Its case also speaks to a potential ceiling for elevated horror in the theatrical market. Zack Sharf at *IndieWire* argues that the financial failure of *Annihilation* had to do with the mainstream moviegoer being unwilling to give "weirder, auteur-driven" films a chance at the box office (Sharf, 2018). If this is the case, then the *Annihilation* sale shows that major studios may have grown averse to distributing elevated horror. Given that streamers like Netflix and Amazon aim to aggregate a diverse library of content, streaming may be a more likely location for elevated horror. Even A24, which relies heavily on theatrical distribution, has benefited from lucrative streaming deals with Amazon, DirecTV, Apple, and Showtime.

Annihilation was one of the few instances of a major studio attempting to distribute elevated horror films to a wide, mainstream audience. Before *Annihilation*, Paramount distributed Darren Aronofsky's *mother!* (2017). The film fits most of the criteria for elevated horror: a style that includes centered composition and slow camera movement; a discordant score; a lack of violent content punctuated by a rapidly paced,

violent climax; and a narrative focusing on the psychological torment and anxieties of its protagonist. *Mother!* failed to reach audiences—it underperformed at the box office and received an F score from audience polling company CinemaScore (Mendelson, 2017)—making it another example of elevated horror not working when in the hands of a major studio.

That is not to say that major studios were wholly unsuccessful at releasing films which fit under the umbrella of elevated horror. The biggest financial success of the elevated horror cycle to date was *Get Out* (d. Peele, 2017), which was produced by the independent company Blumhouse and distributed by Universal. Blumhouse made a name for itself through founder and CEO Jason Blum's low-budget business model in which films are produced for under $5 million. In doing this, the company only requires one or two hits in a year to make up for any losses incurred from its other films. This low-budget model yields many horror films, most of which fall into traditional categories of theatrical horror such as teen screams, slashers, and supernatural films. This model also allows for Blum to comfortably hand over much of the creative control to the films' directors, which, in the case of Jordan Peele, resulted in a massively profitable horror film. The film resonated with audiences to the tune of $252 million worldwide, high critical acclaim, and an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay.

Although Peele calls it a "social thriller" (Yuan and Harris, 2017), *Get Out* also satisfies most of the criteria for elevated horror, and it provides evidence that a major studio can back an elevated horror film and give it the resources to cross over to substantial mainstream success. That said, as of this writing no major studio has

distributed an elevated horror film since *Get Out*. Universal went on to distribute Peele's follow up, *Us* (2019), which does not fit the criteria for elevated horror as neatly as *Get Out* does. In any case, it is possible that *Get Out* was a lightning-in-a-bottle moment for Blumhouse and Universal. Given the specificity of the film's authorial vision and how that was adopted into American culture—the concept of "the sunken place," for example, became part of the American cultural lexicon—the success of *Get Out* arguably has less to do with genre and more to do with what the film is saying about race in America. Peele's use of the horror genre is crucial to how he delivers this message, but it is difficult to argue that the elevated horror aesthetic contributed substantially to the film's impact on American audiences.

The year 2019 was a key one for A24 and its relationship to the elevated horror cycle. The company released Ari Aster's *Midsommar* in July and Robert Eggers' *The Lighthouse* in October. Both films were second features from directors whose debuts were also distributed by A24. The company marketed these films heavily as auteur vehicles. In doing so, A24 crafted a narrative that the films were audacious passion projects from visionary directors, and this narrative was perpetuated in the press. A24's summer release for *Midsommar* showed the company's confidence that this auteur discourse would allow the film to compete against tentpole blockbusters. The film proved to be profitable, earning $46 million worldwide off a $9 million budget. Additionally, *Midsommar* experimented with genre in a way unlike previous films in the cycle. Most notably, it incorporated humor. This is uncommon in elevated horror, which generally relies on grave tones and weighty themes. As such, *Midsommar* presents a notable

departure from the elevated horror aesthetic, which Chapter 3 of this project will examine in greater depth.

The elevated horror cycle is still in progress, and it has grown in notoriety to the point where it has become a hotly contested talking point in horror circles. The critical discourse around elevated horror has progressed, generally speaking, from one of praise for individual films' uses of the elevated horror aesthetic to one of resentment toward the "elevated" terminology. The debate over the merits of calling these films elevated has carried over from blogs and the trades to the popular press. Some are adamant that elevated horror does not exist at all (Knight, 2018; Ehrlich, 2019), thereby choosing to ignore the cycle and look at its films as discrete horror properties. Others view elevated horror as a smug descriptor that separates the few, elite elevated horror properties from the necessarily low-quality non-elevated ones (Ehrlich, 2019).

My view on elevated horror diverges significantly from these critics. I do not see the existence of elevated horror as producing a clear and absolute taste hierarchy distinguishing between elevated and non-elevated. The example of Robin Wood's comparative analysis of *The Omen* (d. Donner, 1976) and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (d. Hooper, 1974) may provide some clarification on this point (1978/2018, pp. 94-95). By Wood's description, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* is "raw" and "unpolished" by design, but that does not mean it is any less of a work of art than *The Omen*, which Wood describes as having "glossy production values."[8] The two films

[8] In fact, Wood makes the case that *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is more artistically ambitious than *The Omen* (1978/2018, p. 95).

contrast in aesthetic, not necessarily in quality. Elevated horror, similarly, is not categorically more artistically valuable than other horror; it is merely an aesthetic. Given the elevated horror cycle's impact on the discourse of contemporary horror cinema, I think dismissing the trend entirely on the grounds of taste politics, as some have, would be a mistake.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This project examines the progression of the elevated horror cycle through case studies of three A24 horror films—*Under the Skin*, *The Witch*, and *Midsommar*. Through a combination of discourse analysis and textual analysis, I look at how A24 employed the aesthetics of elevated horror in its films and how those films were used to perpetuate the company's branding as part of an indie taste culture. A24's house style for theatrically released films, I will argue, depended in part on the "elevated" qualities of its horror films. These qualities, outlined at the beginning of this chapter, received praise in popular press critical discourse which helped to bolster the company's position in the independent film market.

I also endeavor to use these case studies to establish the common elements that link films of the elevated horror cycle together. Textual analyses of each film present a continuity of stylistic, narrative, and generic characteristics. Elements of the elevated horror aesthetic are present in these films, as well as elements which are more conventional of the horror genre. Additionally, all of the films discussed in this project exercise some level of genre hybridity.

Under the Skin, which A24 acquired U.S. distribution rights for in 2013 and released in 2014, came at a time when the still relatively new company was making moves to expand its operations and output. *Under the Skin* also showed the company moving in the direction of non-mainstream genre films. The film was an early example of what the company sought out in its genre films—cerebral, psychological films with an art-house style. Chapter 1 looks at how *Under the Skin* fit into A24's business strategy, and how the company carefully marketed genre films to distinguish itself from other independent studios. *Under the Skin* presented A24 as a studio desiring to release cutting-edge genre films which would appeal to a cinephile audience. At the same time, A24 also desired to expand the audience for these films by distributing them wide and marketing them as more conventional genre fare. Through a comparative analysis of A24's marketing for *Under the Skin* and the marketing for the film by its U.K. distributor StudioCanal, Chapter 1 illustrates these marketing and distribution tactics at work. The chapter also examines how *Under the Skin* is representative of the elevated horror aesthetic, despite it being released before use of the term "elevated horror" became commonplace to describe this cycle of films. Using textual analysis, I show how the film uses both an elevated style and traditional elements of horror to tell its story, as well as the ways in which the film functions as a genre hybrid.

Chapter 2 focuses on the 2016 release of *The Witch*, looking particularly at how the film's success factored into the development of the elevated horror cycle. I would not argue that *The Witch* is the cycle's "originary film"— the term Amanda Ann Klein uses to describe the first major success of any given cycle (2011, pp. 4). However, *The Witch*

succeeded both financially and critically to a degree that earlier films in the cycle had not. This is due in part to A24's aggressive release of the film. The film opened wide, and it achieved the highest worldwide gross of any film A24 had distributed up to that point. As such, the film is a marker of growth for both A24 and the elevated horror cycle. As previously mentioned, 2016 was a remarkable year for A24. With the company's breakout performance at that year's Academy Awards, the box office success of *The Witch*, and the release of *Moonlight* (d. Jenkins, 2016)—the film which would win the Best Picture Oscar in 2017—2016 was arguably the year where the seeds of A24's goals began to bear fruit.

Chapter 3 focuses on *Midsommer*, released in 2019, which was something of a watershed year for A24. The company distributed more films in 2019 than it had in any previous year. Among this slate of films was the first film acquired alongside Apple for the tech company's newly minted streaming platform, as well as the first films produced by A24 in partnership with HBO. A24 also made an exclusive streaming deal with Showtime for an undisclosed sum (Low, 2019). The various deals that were moving A24's content into the streaming space showed a diversification of the company's revenue streams, which provided it the means to continue distributing its highest profile films wide theatrically. Given that the theatrical revenue for even the highest grossing of these films is modest, these partnerships are crucial to the company's continual push for brand name relevancy in the indie market.

Of the 13 films that received a theatrical release from A24 in 2019, three were made by directors who were working with the studio for the second time—*Midsommar*,

The Lighthouse, and *Uncut Gems* (d. Safdie and Safdie, 2019). And Trey Edward Shults' *Waves* marked the director's third collaboration with the studio. Given their formal ambition, all four of these films could make compelling case studies in an analysis of authorial autonomy within an independent studio. As it pertains to the current project, though, the ambition of both *Midsommar* and *The Lighthouse* present a heightening of the elevated horror aesthetic that is worthy of closer study. *Midsommar,* in particular, is a key case when looking at the marketing and distribution strategies of A24 horror product. The film was given a wide, 2,700-theater release in the heart of the summer season. A director's cut of the film was then released six weeks later in over 600 theaters. Clearly A24 was banking on the credentials of their brand and Aster, coming off the success of *Hereditary,* to drum up enthusiasm over multiple cuts of the film. The director's cut did not necessarily pay off for A24, as the four-week-long release netted under $1 million. However, it speaks to the stock A24 places in their brand name and stable of directors to cultivate a loyal audience. Chapter 3 will look in-depth at this relationship between A24 and directors like Aster, addressing to what extent discourses of *auteurism* factor into their market strategy.

With this project, I have a vested interest in continuing the historicization of the horror genre. In doing so, I have chosen as my focus a production cycle that is very much still ongoing and a studio whose impact on the American entertainment industry will only be properly and exhaustively measured from a future point of retrospection. Both A24 and the elevated horror cycle are works in progress. Nevertheless, and as this introduction has laid out, I find that the contemporary trend of elevated horror fits neatly into the

periodizing method of cycle studies. Furthermore, I believe A24 to be a crucial object of study when it comes to both American independent cinema and horror cinema of the 2010s.

Chapter 1: A24 and the Presentation of Genre in *Under the Skin*

This chapter examines the generic dimensions of the 2013 film *Under the Skin* (d. Glazer). Although its release predates the contemporary usage of "elevated horror," *Under the Skin* anticipates the elevated horror cycle with its narrative, style, and genre hybridity. This chapter aims to establish *Under the Skin* as a precursor to the elevated horror cycle and A24's involvement in the cycle's popularization. A24 served as the U.S. distributor for *Under the Skin*, and the company reconstructed the film's genre elements in its marketing materials. I argue that this marketing tactic, which A24 used to sell *Under the Skin* and its future horror films to mainstream audiences, greatly influenced the conversation around the elevated horror cycle. Assessing how genre was presented in *Under the Skin*, A24's marketing for the film, and the film's critical reception is thus an effective place to begin when discussing A24 and its relationship to elevated horror.

Before this discussion of *Under the Skin*, I will briefly outline the industrial environment from which A24 originates. Entire books have been written about the independent boom that began in the early-1980s, the Sundance-Miramax era, and the rise of Indiewood. These accounts do a thorough job of articulating the many variables in the roughly 40-year lifespan of contemporary independence. What I hope to do here is provide a brief historical survey of American independent cinema from which A24 emerges.

The "independent" in American independent cinema has been a descriptor for films produced, distributed, and/or exhibited outside of the Hollywood studio system and

major theater chains (Newman, 2011, p. 3). The Poverty Row companies—Republic and Monogram (later known as Allied Artists), most notably—were alternatives to the major studios during the classical era. As Tzioumakis outlines, following the Paramount decree Republic, Allied Artists, and a number of newer independents shifted their market strategies to weather the storm of economic recession, the end of the exhibition practice of double bills, and the rise of television programming "modelled on the B film" (2017, pp. 124-125). From the 1950s to the end of the 1960s, these "low-end independents" tapped into the youth market, ushering in a new genre of exploitation "teenpic" films (Tzioumakis, 2017, pp. 133-134). Chief among them was American International Pictures (AIP). AIP co-founders Samuel Z. Arkoff and James H. Nicholson adopted a shrewd marketing approach labeled the "Peter Pan Syndrome," in which they reasoned that targeting the 19-year-old male would result in catching the largest young audience (Tzioumakis, 2017, pp. 138-139).

Tzioumakis continues his account by noting the turbulence of American society in the late-1960s and, by extension, an existential crisis moment for the film industry:

> While the country was in social and cultural upheaval, the American film industry had to face its own set of severe problems as well as keep up with the transformations in the American social and cultural fabric. These problems included: the financial overexposure of the majors … the continual audience decline, which reached an ultimate low of 15.8 million people a week in early 1971[*sic*]; the decrease in the number of theatres; the entrance of the television networks into the theatrical market, which

> increased competition and contributed to a glut of product; and an extremely outdated (despite substantial revisions) Production Code, which the industry was still trying to enforce at a time of sweeping changes in sexual mores. (2017, pp. 155-156)

What came out of this period of volatility was the "Hollywood renaissance," which brought into the mainstream elements characteristic of exploitation and European art-house cinemas. Films like *Easy Rider* (distributed by Columbia) were part of the conversation of independence at the same time that American International Pictures continued "leading the way" in exploitation cinema and another emergent trend, the "New American Cinema," was coming to the fore (Tzioumakis, 2017, pp. 156-158). Films of the New American Cinema were released at the margins, produced and distributed outside of the Hollywood structure (Tzioumakis, 2017, pp. 158).

This ethos of independence from the studios would later be adopted by indie filmmakers of the 1980s, with notable releases like *Stranger than Paradise* (d. Jarmusch, 1984) and *She's Gotta Have It* (d. Lee, 1986) leading the charge. This indie movement was "off-Hollywood" both in its economic contexts of being produced outside of Hollywood and being distributed by "genuine independents," as well as in its geographical distance from Los Angeles, with the movement's "epicenter" being New York City (Schatz, 2013, p. 128).

As Newman argues, independent cinema since the 1980s has held a different connotation than these previous iterations (2011, p. 24). For Newman, from the 1980s onward independent cinema "assumed a place and function in American film culture that

it never before had" (2011, p. 24). This new situation of independence was due in large part to an industrial infrastructure that rose up to support independent filmmaking, an "institutional base" which Geoff King argues helped the independent sector grow in ways that the New American Cinema of the 1960s was not able (2005, p. 21). The introduction of film festivals, most prominently the U.S. Film Festival (later known as Sundance), the creation of a number of "small-scale distributors," and the rapid growth of the home video market all contributed to the success of independent cinema throughout the 1980s (King, 2005, pp. 19-23).[9]

This institutionalization of independence continued into the 1990s. The profile of Sundance increased to the point where the festival resembled a marketplace. An increase in journalists covering the event and industry actors in attendance looking for talent and acquisitions coincided with an increase in film submissions (Perren, 2012, pp. 156-157). This raised the barrier to entry for unknown shoestring budget filmmakers. Meanwhile, the Hollywood majors were making moves to diversify their output, which had become increasingly hit-driven since the late-1970s. Their solution to distributing films "not broadly targeted to all moviegoers" was to establish subsidiary indie divisions (Perren, 2012, p. 56). In 1992, Sony recruited former Orion executives Michael Barker, Tom Bernard, and Marcie Bloom to launch Sony Pictures Classics, the first of these subsidiary divisions (Perren, 2012, p. 57). 20th Century Fox followed suit with Fox Searchlight. In 1993, Disney purchased Miramax and the Turner Broadcasting System (TBS) purchased

[9] As Thomas Schatz points out, at the height of the 1980s indie movement home video was seen as a boon for the independents, but by the end of the decade the home video market would show itself to be more dedicated to hit-driven product, a trend that ultimately hurt the independent movement (2013, p. 129).

New Line (Schatz, 2013, p. 133). Barry Diller acquired October Films and Gramercy Pictures in 1999, folding them into USA Films, which itself became part of a merger that resulted in Universal's indie division Focus Features (Perren, 2012, pp. 216-218).

With these institutional changes, the major studios firmly inserted themselves into the indie conversation, and consolidation made it difficult for "true independents" to compete. This period of consolidation brought with it, according to Newman, a notion of independent cinema that "achieved a level of cultural circulation far greater than in earlier eras, making independence into a brand, a familiar idea that evokes in consumers a range of emotional and symbolic associations" (2011, p. 4). Even as the Indiewood wave started to wane in the late-2000s, this concept of indie branding remained a critical part of the independent film scene.

For independent companies that launched in the 2010s like Neon and A24, establishing the brand is a top priority in the pursuit of prestige. Neon, founded by Tom Quinn and Alamo Drafthouse theater chain co-founder Tim League, distributes a mix of prestige dramas, arty genre films, documentaries, and international films. The latter two categories rarely see financial success at the domestic box office—with notable exceptions like *Fahrenheit 9/11* (d. Moore, 2004) and *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* (d. Lee, 2000) more or less proving the rule. Still, the company uses the theatrical release as part of their market strategy, even for these types of films. In a 2019 interview with *Screen Daily*, EVP of acquisitions and production Jeff Deutchman articulates that the theatrical release is the best "model to chase real upside, both financial and in terms of cultural impact" (Kay, 2019). "[P]reserving the traditional theatrical window,"

Deutchman says, “can be the best possible advertisement for the film’s life on [streaming]” (Kay, 2019). By focusing on the advertisement of a film’s “cultural impact” in theatrical venues, Neon is effectively gearing its distribution strategy, from the outset, toward prestige accolades that will undoubtedly help their brand name recognition. It is a tactic that proved successful in their distribution of Bong Joon-ho’s Best Picture-winning *Parasite* in 2019, which spawned headlines like “‘Parasite’ has shocked the box office, helped by an upstart studio” (*The New York Times*, November 27, 2019) and “‘Parasite’ Oscars are a huge win for Neon. Why the scrappy indie bet on Bong Joon Ho” (*The Los Angeles Times,* February 10, 2020).

Neon’s efforts towards company branding are evident, too, in its awards season “for your consideration” (FYC) campaigns. At the end of the calendar year, various voting bodies receive “screeners” of a company’s films for awards consideration. This can often take the form of a cheaply produced cardstock sleeve displaying the film’s poster and containing a DVD copy of the film (see Fig. 1.2). Neon’s annual FYC screeners, on the other hand, are bound together as a book (Fig. 1.1). Emblazoned on the front of the book is the flashy and appropriately neon-tinted company logo. With other studios’ screeners, the company logo appears as a small insignia on the front or back of the sleeve, positioned as secondary information. Neon, on the other hand, positions the titles of their films on the back of the book. While most companies present individual films as awards-worthy, Neon foregrounds its corporate branding. Thus, it presents itself as a prestige studio whose annual release slate is emblematic of this prestige brand.

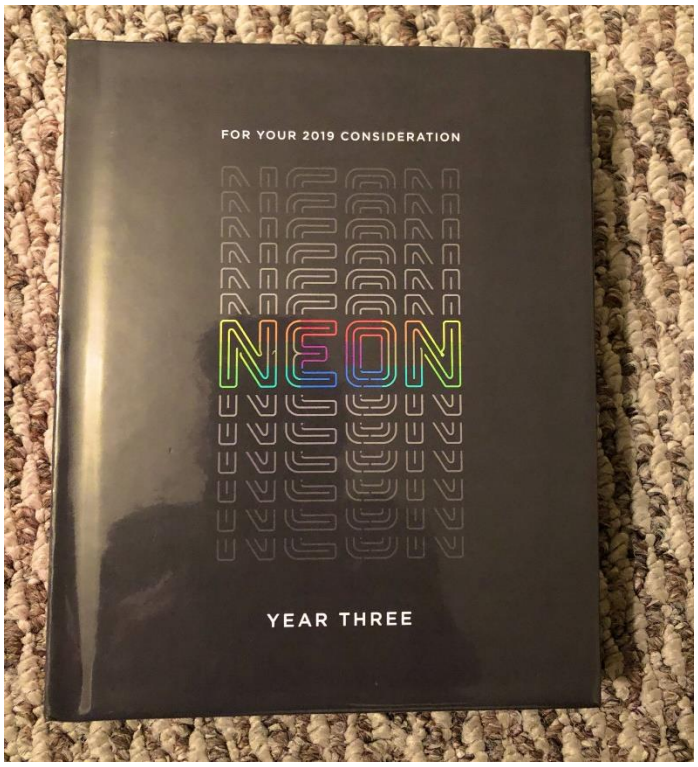

Fig. 1.1: The Neon FYC book prominently features the company's branding (Weber, 2019).

Fig. 1.2: The Dunkirk screener from Warner Bros. does not display studio branding (Ehrlich, 2017).

A24 was brand-focused from the beginning. According to a *Los Angeles Times* profile (written less than one year after the company's 2012 launch), one of A24's driving goals was "to rewrite the indie-movie playbook by erasing the divide between art-house cinema and the multiplex" (Lee, 2013). Speaking of the "art-house ghetto," the piece illustrates the indie space as one where creativity is suffocated by a lack of visibility, and it presents A24 as a company which can remove the shackles of indie stigma by providing its films with "hard-won cultural exposure" (Lee, 2013). This frames A24 as similar to the biggest indie brand of the 1990s, Miramax, and it narrativizes A24 as a beacon of hope in the desolate desert of independence. This positions the company's theatrical goal as a noble pursuit. However, I would argue that the theatrical distribution of its product serves a goal beyond this rose-colored narrative of saving indie cinema. "Erasing the divide" by bringing art-house cinema to multiplexes is a means of

cultivating brand recognition. By claiming its films as art-house fare with mainstream appeal, the company situates itself as an alternative to both the art-house theater environment and the big-budget blockbuster product that dominates the multiplexes.

"A GLIMPSE INSIDE" A24: THE BEGINNING

David Fenkel left Oscilloscope Laboratories in May of 2012 (Kilday, 2012). The film distribution arm of the company, Oscilloscope Pictures, which Fenkel co-founded with Adam Yauch in 2008 with the aim of releasing "unique, independently produced films" (Oscilloscope, n.d.), was responsible for distributing films like *Wendy and Lucy* (d. Reichardt, 2008), *Polytechnique* (d. Villeneuve, 2009), *Meek's Cutoff* (d. Reichardt, 2011), and *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (d. Ramsay, 2012). On August 20, 2012, Fenkel announced his next venture: a distribution company headquartered in New York City that would acquire finished films in the festival market as well as finance and produce its own projects (McNary, 2012a).

Fenkel co-founded A24 with fellow industry veterans Daniel Katz and John Hodges. Hodges was coming from Big Beach Films, which had produced *Little Miss Sunshine* (d. Dayton and Faris, 2006), *Away We Go* (d. Mendes, 2009), *Our Idiot Brother* (d. Peretz, 2011), and *Safety Not Guaranteed* (d. Trevorrow, 2012). Before serving as head of production and development at that company, Hodges was an acquisitions executive at Focus Features (Fernandez, 2012). Katz, meanwhile, worked in the film division of Guggenheim Partners, which co-financed *Twilight* (d. Hardwicke, 2008), *Zombieland* (d. Fleischer, 2009), and *The Social Network* (d. Fincher, 2010) (Fernandez,

2012). The studio-heads-to-be each carried professional expertise in one of the three areas in which they hoped A24 would be able to excel: Fenkel in distribution, Hodges in production, and Katz in financing. Similar to Oscilloscope's ambitious annual slate, the plan for A24 was to distribute between eight and ten films per year, and, even more ambitious still, some releases would be positioned for wide theatrical release (Kay, 2012).

A24's first acquisition was for the U.S. theatrical rights to *A Glimpse Inside the Mind of Charles Swan III* (d. Coppola, 2013), a deal made in the lead-up to the 2012 Toronto International Film Festival. This came just 10 days after the founding of the company was announced (Fleming, 2012). At Toronto, the company picked up the North American rights to Sally Potter's *Ginger & Rosa* (2013) (McNary, 2012b). Later that year, it partnered with Annapurna to domestically release *Spring Breakers* (d. Korine, 2013) (McNary, 2012c). A24 ended 2012 with these three deals in place, which signaled what brand of film the company was interested in releasing and what its goals for such films were. All three were films from directors with an indie track record. Roman Coppola had co-written *The Darjeeling Limited* (Fox Searchlight, 2007) and *Moonrise Kingdom* (Focus Features, 2012) with director Wes Anderson. Potter was best known for *Orlando* (1992), which was distributed by the conglomerate-owned indie division Sony Pictures Classics. And Harmony Korine was well-known in the indie scene for his subversive films, which had been distributed by indie divisions like Fine Line Features and more esoteric independents like the record label Drag City.

A24 seemed to be pursuing talent which had previously attracted the attention of conglomerate-owned indie divisions—this at a time when most of them had fallen by the wayside or had been folded into their major studio parent company as the majors focused their resources on franchise filmmaking (Schatz, 2013, pp. 137-138). And, in a decade where streaming was a rapidly growing sector and becoming a viable new release strategy for independent film, A24 seemed to be boldly doubling down on theatrical distribution. *Spring Breakers* received a wide release, topping out at over 1,300 theaters in the U.S. *The Spectacular Now* (d. Ponsoldt, 2013) had a platform release, topping out at 770 theaters. Sofia Coppola's *The Bling Ring* (2013) released to 650 theaters. A24's aspirations of having prestige releases with high visibility and awards-season buzz followed the company right out of the gate—even if those aspirations did not immediately bear fruit. Aside from *Spring Breakers*, none of A24's 2013 releases paid off at the box office, and its early hopes of awards-season accolades for these films petered out quickly. *Ginger & Rosa*, which the company initially slated for awards consideration in late 2012 (McNary, 2012b), instead was released in March 2013 to little fanfare. And while the rigorous and unique "consider this shit" FYC campaign to net James Franco a Best Supporting Actor nomination at the Academy Awards may have attracted the attention of the trade and popular presses (Keegan, 2013; Gray, 2013; Dockterman, 2013), it did not ultimately generate significant awards-season consideration outside of a handful of film critics associations.

These storylines may not have ended exactly how A24 intended, but it is telling of how the company was dedicated early on to establishing itself as a notable entity in the

indie space while simultaneously pushing for box office hits. The company's desire to be a bullish disrupter both at the box office and during the awards season—a two-pronged tactic exercised by Miramax before it—is evident in its decision to put its resources behind a film from a veteran yet non-mainstream director like Korine.[10] It is perhaps emblematic of A24's balancing act between on the one hand branding based on Hollywood opposition and on the other the economic drive for a theatrical hit that none of the films Korine had directed before *Spring Breakers* grossed more than $200,000 at the box office (Simpson, 2013). Not to mention its "for your consideration" efforts for *Spring Breakers* played out, in part, on the company's "irreverent" social media (Gray, 2013). This functioned both to provide an offbeat FYC campaign that could drum up publicity and to court a young, cinephile audience looking for an alternative to the Hollywood mainstream. This social media presence paints A24 as being an active participant in this oppositional tone, although the company's financial goals are in line with those of other Hollywood studios.

Michael Z. Newman identifies an "indie culture" which is positioned in opposition to the mainstream (2009, p. 16). He views "indie" as a "cinematic and cultural category that is not determined by the industrial definition … it is a contradictory notion insofar as it counters and implicitly criticizes hegemonic mass culture, desiring to be an authentic alternative to it, but also serves as a taste culture perpetuating the privilege of a social elite of upscale consumers" (2009, p. 17). Newman claims this "taste culture"

[10] Korine's own career was launched by Miramax with *Kids* (1995), a film he wrote which fueled controversy and a cult following.

niche is “mainly young … white, educated, affluent, and urban” (2009, p. 22). A24, as Newman suggests of indie culture, seeks both to differentiate itself from the homogenized mainstream of Hollywood and to embrace the commercialism of the entertainment industries. This is, to be sure, not unlike other independent studios. A24 has amassed its niche audience out of this “indie culture” sector, playing into the aspects of its products that present an opposition to the mainstream and profiting off the young (i.e., millennial and gen Z) cineaste consumer. The indie taste culture is a key component of the company’s brand identity, and I believe it is an identity carefully cultivated in such a way that an oppositional attitude is not taken at the expense of the profit motive.

The company’s deal to co-finance films with DirecTV is one facet of its market strategy that exemplifies this careful brand construction. The deal, announced in September 2013 and carrying an initial $40 million price tag, gave DirecTV exclusive rights to some of A24’s future content for use on DirecTV’s on-demand service 30 days prior to any theatrical release (Spangler, 2013). The windowing practices that most major theater chains insist on would, in practice, make theatrically distributing films under this deal difficult. Given A24’s commitment to theatrical distribution, this deal bifurcated the company’s slate into two camps: the theatrical on the one hand, and the streaming and VOD on the other. Films under the DirecTV deal might receive limited theatrical runs in venues outside of the major theater chains, but they would not receive the wide releases of A24 films which were not part of the deal. In addition, DirecTV’s nascent foray into original VOD content was limited to DirecTV subscribers and offered at an additional premium cost (Spangler, 2013). Given the limited reach of these releases, it would be

difficult for A24 to garner significant brand recognition from films under the DirectTV deal. The deal offered A24 an additional revenue stream, but the films released through it were traditional genre fare not associated with the company's prestige brand. A24 reserved its prestige content for theatrical distribution, where the company could present its brand to a wider audience.

It is not hard to see, in retrospect, this branding tactic at work. Films released theatrically by A24 are integral pieces of its house style—they are presented as being cutting edge art-house content from directors whom the company positions as auteur talent. The company's top-grossing films—*Hereditary* (d. Aster, 2018), *Lady Bird* (d. Gerwig, 2017), *Moonlight* (d. Jenkins, 2016), *Uncut Gems* (d. Safdie and Safdie, 2019), *Midsommar* (d. Aster, 2019), *The Witch* (d. Eggers, 2016), and *Ex Machina* (d. Garland, 2015)—illustrate this brand quite well. Meanwhile, films released under the DirecTV deal are, by and large, lesser-known films which are not afforded this upper-tier presentation—films such as *Son of a Gun* (Avery, 2014), *Equals* (d. Doremus, 2015), *Barely Lethal* (d. Newman, 2015), and *Backstabbing for Beginners* (d. Fly, 2017). As A24 became a prominent player in indie cinema, it was the theatrical output that exemplified what an A24 film looked like; the DirecTV films released as a means of diversifying A24's revenue streams were absent from this conversation.

Under the Skin was an early attempt by A24 to cultivate its brand identity by theatrically releasing prestige genre cinema. Given the film's unique presentation of genre, it serves as a prime example of both an elevated genre property and the type of content A24 uses to satisfy its niche fanbase while simultaneously courting a more

mainstream audience. Coming a few years before "elevated horror" was a hot button phrase in the discourse of horror cinema, *Under the Skin* was an early example of the aesthetic that would come to define the elevated horror cycle.

THE 13-YEAR JOURNEY OF *UNDER THE SKIN*

Michel Faber's novel *Under the Skin* was optioned in November 2000 by production company and management firm Industry Entertainment (Lyons, 2000). The book, Faber's first, received some critical accolades, including being shortlisted for the United Kingdom's prestigious Whitbread Award (now the Costa Book Awards) for Best First Novel ("Whitbread Prize," 2000). In it, an alien named Isserley is hired by a corporation to harvest human males for their meat. Traveling along Scottish highways, she picks up hitchhikers and drugs them, taking them back to an isolated, rural location where other alien workers farm them like cattle.

Film4 (FilmFour, at the time) was brought on to develop the project, and Jonathan Glazer was tapped to direct the adaptation (Lyons, 2000). Glazer was known at that time for directing music videos for Radiohead, and his feature film debut was two months away from its initial UK release. This debut, *Sexy Beast* (2000), was a critical darling. Co-star Ben Kingsley earned Best Supporting Actor nominations at the Golden Globes, the Screen Actors Guild Awards, and the Academy Awards, and Glazer received a BAFTA nomination for Best British Film. The accolades and critical acclaim for *Sexy Beast* made the prospect of a Glazer-directed *Under the Skin* adaptation look promising.

However, it would take over a decade for *Under the Skin* to finish production and receive a theatrical release.

While the first pass at an adaptation of *Under the Skin* was being written by novelist-turned-screenwriter Alexander Stuart (Wiseman, 2014), Glazer moved on to another project, *Birth* (2004), which was a substantial disappointment. The film was booed at its premiere at the Venice Film Festival and, lacking the critical support it needed to sell audiences on its inaccessible premise, subsequently fell into obscurity (Robey, 2017). Glazer then returned to *Under the Skin* and the Stuart script (Leigh, 2014). This script was a "relatively faithful rendition" of the book, according to producer James Wilson (Wiseman, 2014). This version did not interest Glazer much, although he was not sure at the time what was missing (Leigh, 2014). Months of re-writing ensued. Glazer cycled through writing collaborators, first Milo Addica and then Walter Campbell (Leigh, 2014). Campbell and Glazer would end up with final writing credit on the film.

By 2008, Glazer and Campbell were finishing a script that came with an estimated production budget of $40 million (Wiseman, 2014). Brad Pitt was brought on to give the film a marketing boost in the form of A-list talent; he was to play one half of an alien pair who pretended to be a husband and wife in the Scottish countryside. Pitt moved on from the project before production began, resulting in changes to the script which focused solely on the female alien (Leigh, 2014). Scarlett Johansson was tapped for the role. According to Glen Basner, whose company FilmNation handled the film's sales, "[Johansson] gave the film a commercial backbone," resulting in pre-sales at the 2010 American Film Market of around $4.5 million (Wiseman, 2014). The film was thus sold

in large part on Johansson's star persona, a somewhat ironic prospect given the ways in which the film actively downplays her star status. The character's hair, costuming, and English accent, as well as the "extended Kuleshov experiment" that is her lack of significant facial expressions (Herzog, 2016), strip away the star image for the purposes of capturing "real" interactions with non-actors. In one scene, Johansson's character trips and falls onto the pavement, where she is helped up by real-life bystanders who "appear not to recognize her" (Herzog, 2016). The filming of this scene, however, was observed by "paparazzi and pedestrians who [did] recognize Johansson as Johansson" (Herzog, 2016). I think this example nicely illustrates how the film was both sold on Johansson as a marquee star and filmed with the intent to undercut the notion of a "star vehicle" by shooting non-actors who did not realize they were interacting with an A-list actor.

Under the Skin premiered at the 2013 Telluride Film Festival and then screened at Venice, to a warmer reception than *Birth* yet still a decidedly mixed response. U.S. distribution rights for the film were acquired by A24 within 24 hours of its next screening, which took place at the Toronto International Film Festival. The deal carried a price tag that was just north of $1 million (Fleming Jr., 2013), and it would be A24's first science-fiction/horror release.

Glazer's finished product is not easily confined to one genre. Glazer himself comments on how science fiction was a "starting point" for the project but not a wholly satisfying label for it (Sartin, 2014). Johansson has said that the film is not a genre film at all, but instead something which is harder to define (StudiocanalUK, 2014c). Despite Johansson's comments presenting the film as something which is not describable through

genre means, *Under the Skin* does contain generic traits. The film carries some recognizable conventions of the science fiction genre, but ultimately it is a genre hybrid. This genre hybridity, along with the film's style and psychological narrative, fit quite nicely into the definition of elevated horror outlined in this project's Introduction. The film has in some cases been retroactively placed within the corpus of elevated horror—David Church, in his book on "post-horror" (a common synonym for "elevated horror"), places *Under the Skin* as the earliest example of the cycle's "primary/core texts" (2021, p. 14).

The film's aesthetic, stripped-down narrative, and genre hybridity produced an air of inaccessibility that made its commercial prospects questionable. As much as Film4, A24, and UK distributor StudioCanal sold the film on Glazer's reputation, the delayed production made marketing *Under the Skin* on the success of *Sexy Beast* a difficult task. The companies foregrounded other selling points of the film in their marketing materials, resulting in trailers which were in many respects similar, but which differed in a few key areas. Highlighting these differences helps to show A24's intentions for the film *vis-a-vis* their brand identity. A24 deployed *Under the Skin* in a manner which both presented the film as an art-house project geared toward a cineaste audience while simultaneously showcasing the elements of the film which made it more commercially viable. This is the first instance of A24 marketing elevated horror as part of its house style and brand, and it is a signal for how the company would use elevated horror as a key part of its business strategy moving forward.

RECONSTRUCTING GENRE IN THE *UNDER THE SKIN* MARKETING

Under the Skin was distributed in the U.S. by A24 and in the U.K. by StudioCanal. The "teaser trailer" for *Under the Skin*, which StudioCanal and production company Film4 featured on their YouTube accounts but A24 did not (Film4, 2014; StudiocanalUK, 2014a), very prominently emphasizes the more avant-garde, abstract imagery of film. The first 52 seconds of StudioCanal's 83-second advertisement comes from one of the first images of the film. It is an indiscernible spherical object, resembling an inhuman pupil filling with inky blackness, which then cuts to a human eye in extreme closeup (Fig. 1.3). It is an image that calls to mind the notion of gazing, as well as a connection between the human and the non-human which plays a key role in the film's narrative. This image, however, does not sell the film to the consumer in a traditional way. They are not images which establish the basic elements that a trailer would normally foreground: premise, character, setting, creative talent, etc. The names of Johansson and Glazer are not foregrounded, and there are no depictions of events from the film which would establish a narrative premise. The names of Johansson and Glazer do appear at the end of the trailer, but this follows imagery which establishes almost no information about the film itself. Glimpses of Johansson are seen in the trailer's final few seconds, but these shots are shown so briefly that one could watch them and not even discern that the woman is in fact the A-list actor.

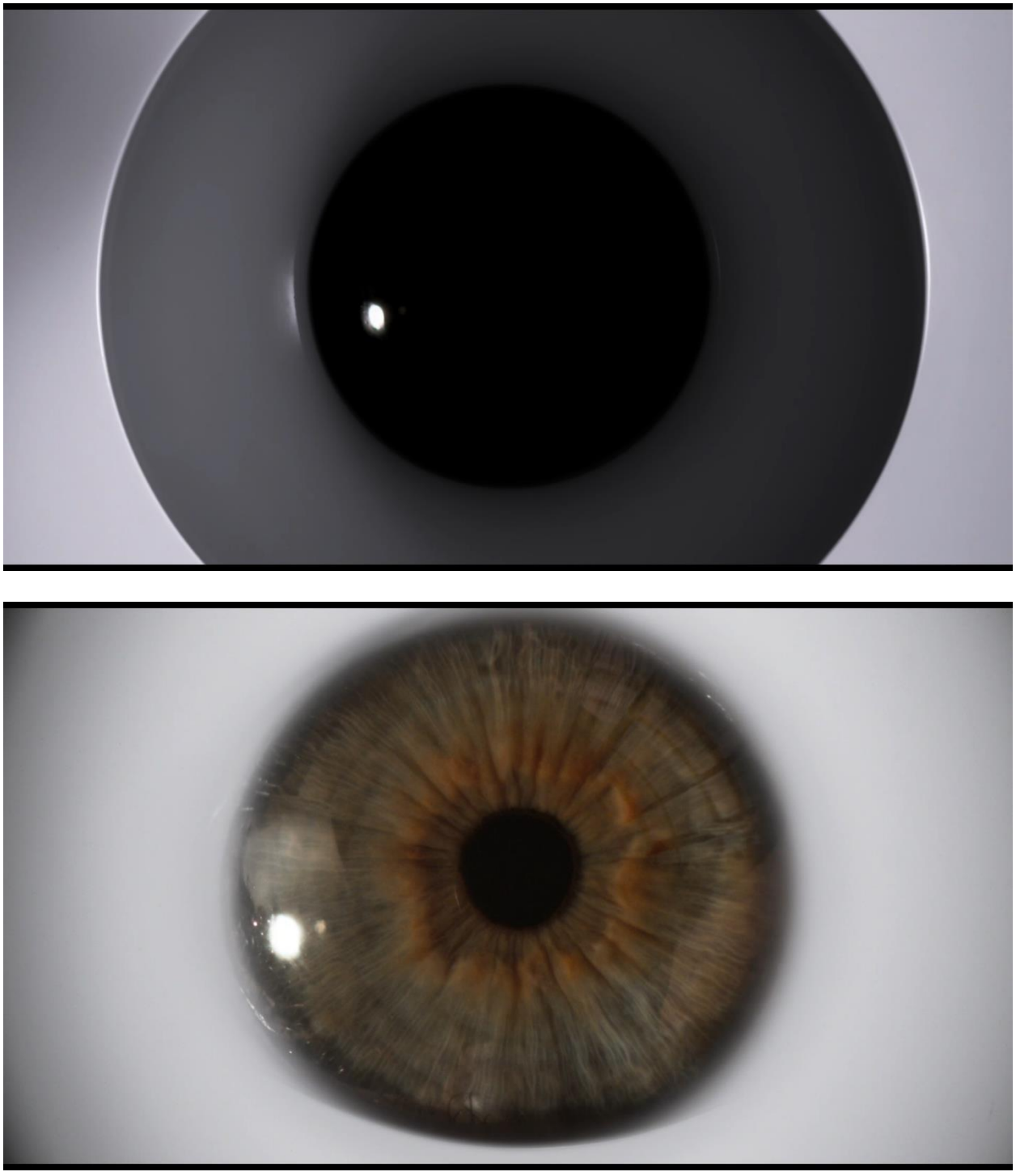

Fig. 1.3: More than half of the runtime of the teaser trailer for *Under the Skin* features these two ambiguous shots.

StudioCanal's teaser trailer sells *Under the Skin* as an art-house or even avant-garde take on a horror-thriller. A24's marketing materials also display this art-house inaccessibility, but not nearly to the same extent. A24's theatrical trailer also begins with the film's difficult-to-parse opening shots, but it shows them much more briefly (A24, 2014a). Very quickly, Johansson becomes the centerpiece of the trailer, thereby selling the film as a star vehicle in a way that the StudiocCanal trailer does not. Images of Johansson in A24's trailer are then followed by images of her character's potential victims, which are shown while being underscored by foreboding music. Voiceover dialogue establishes Johansson's character as seducing the men she picks up in her van. Glazer's name appears, alongside his previous credits. Then A24's trailer turns to sex appeal marketing with images of Johansson in lingerie. The trailer then cuts to a few brief shots of less-accessible imagery such as Johansson's disembodied face in a field of orange light and liquid shooting down a conveyer belt. These more abstract images, however, are crosscut with quotes from critics' reviews which paint the film as "strangely erotic" and terrifying. Then, Johansson's character is positioned as a more prototypical horror movie villain, standing on a beach looking on coldly as two people struggle to swim against the tide. A shot of her emotionless face as the people in the water are evidently drowning ends with a violently dissonant musical sting that is typical of a horror movie trailer. She is then shown engaging in sexual activity with a man. The end of this A24 trailer increases the pace, amplifying the propulsive score and showing Johansson's character being kidnapped and running through a forest, culminating in a shot of a fiery figure in the woods.

Comparing the two trailers shows that StudioCanal's marketing was aimed at the art-house crowd, while A24's attempted to appeal to both the art-house and the mainstream. A24's trailer does not distance itself from the less accessible elements of Glazer's film. It adopts in its trailer similar imagery to the StudioCanal teaser trailer, imagery which would sell the film to an audience looking for something less mainstream than what major studios generally produce. But A24 also foregrounded elements of the film which would sell to a wider audience (e.g., Johansson's star persona and familiar generic traits). The trailer presents the film as erotic, sensual, horrifying, and action packed. Not only did A24 foreground these generic elements, but in some instances it exaggerated them. Perhaps the most prominent example of this is in the depiction of the film's sexuality. While the element of sex is ingrained into the film's horror conceit and is thus portrayed in the film as more insidious than erotic, the depiction of sex in A24's trailer sells the film on the partial nudity and sexual situations involving Johansson. It places some of these moments out of their insidious context in such a way as to position the film as something closer to an erotic thriller than a science fiction film.

A featurette on A24's YouTube channel featuring Johansson also works to exaggerate this eroticism (A24, 2014b). In it, Johansson describes her character as having a "darkness" and a "hunger" while the featurette cuts to images of her character undressing. While Johansson seems to be describing the character's arc as an alien whose drives and curiosity lead her to become something resembling human, the featurette is marketing the "darkness" and "hunger" as relating directly to the character's sexuality. In fact, the majority of the footage pulled from the film for this featurette depicts sexuality

and Johansson's character seducing men, despite Johansson speaking in her interview about other aspects of the film related to the production process, the film's themes, and her character's development. As a point of contrast, StudioCanal's marketing also utilized a video featurette discussing Johansson's work on the film (StudiocanalUK, 2014c). This featurette shows clips of the film that suggest Johansson's character seducing men, but it does not directly market Johansson's performance on sex appeal in the way A24 does.

A24's employment of Johansson's star person in its promotional material involved a rather traditional approach to marketing sex appeal. It takes the film's more nuanced interpretation of the male and female gazes and reduces it to a piece of marketing in which the male gaze is the selling point. At the same time, the interviews on the A24 featurette from Johansson, Glazer, and producer James Wilson are attempting to speak to the craft of portraying this alien character as being a triumph and something unlike what is seen in mainstream Hollywood films.

These marketing materials reinforce two points. First, they are demonstrative of A24's efforts to acquire, distribute, and sell films which appear to be outside of the mainstream. In doing this, they strive to court a cinephile audience, one which subscribes to the indie taste culture as outlined by Newman. Second, the trailer and interview featurette show that A24 does not want this cinephile niche to come at the expense of a wider, mainstream audience. The company wants to present itself as a hip indie studio that is giving a cinephile audience the movies that they want to see but cannot find anywhere else. However, the company also welcomes a "crossover" hit wherever they

can find it. As co-founder David Fenkel stresses in the *Los Angeles Times* profile, A24 "wants all [of its] films to cross over" (Lee, 2013). Part of this balance between a non-mainstream acquisition like *Under the Skin* and the company's mainstream aspirations is a marketing approach that involves both showcasing stylistic novelty and foregrounding genre conventionality. This marketing aims to serve two masters—to construct and maintain their brand, and to sell their product.

In the case of *Under the Skin*, the marketing did not amount to a crossover hit. Far from it, the film grossed just $2.6 million domestically. In the United Kingdom, the film made $1.9 million (USD) in 84 theaters (Box Office Mojo, n.d.), performing well with the art-house crowd. That the film performed only marginally better in the U.S. shows A24's failure to draw in mainstream audiences in the numbers it had hoped to. Nevertheless, the company would replicate these marketing tactics with future horror releases, and these releases would help propel the discourse surrounding the elevated horror cycle.

APPROACHING ELEVATED: GENRE AND *UNDER THE SKIN*

The marketing of *Under the Skin* by A24 might portray Scarlett Johansson's unnamed character as a succubus-inspired horror villain, but the character's role in the film itself is that of the protagonist. This is true of the book, as well, which mainly situates its narration within the subjectivity of the alien character, who is called Isserley. Both the novel and the film take a hybrid approach to genre—mixing elements of science fiction, horror, and psychological thriller—and at their core they are both character

dramas. With this blending of genres, it is difficult to categorize *Under the Skin* as merely a science fiction film. Given, too, the long production history outlined above, I argue that it is similarly difficult to place the film within the corpus of the elevated horror cycle. With the film's story being both an adaptation and developed prior to the popularization of the neo-grindhouse cycle in 2004 with *Saw*, the film stems from a different context than the films of the elevated horror cycle.[11]

However, *Under the Skin* remains relevant to the present conversation of A24 and elevated horror in that it is representative of the horror films A24 would go on to distribute. These later films, beginning with *The Witch* in 2016, would influence the trajectory of the elevated horror cycle. *The Witch*, some have argued, began the conversation of the elevated horror cycle (Crump, 2019), and that film's success led to major studios trying their hand at releasing elevated horror. As previously mentioned, *Under the Skin* has been retroactively added to the cycle's corpus by David Church (2021, p. 14), as it exemplifies the style, narrative, and tone that would come to be associated with elevated horror. I argue that the film's focus on character psychology and its spare depictions of violence, along with elements of style which this section will engage with, meet the parameters of elevated horror. The film certainly belongs in a conversation of the cycle, even if its release predates the use of the term "elevated horror."

[11] See the Introduction for a discussion of how the neo-grindhouse cycle of the 2000s gave way to the elevated horror cycle.

It should be noted, too, how genre hybridity functions within the elevated horror cycle more broadly. Many films of the cycle engage with some form of genre hybridity. As will be discussed in Chapters Two and Three, both *The Witch* and *The Lighthouse* (d. Eggers, 2019) contain elements of historical drama with their period piece settings and the acute attention paid to the period accuracy of their dialogue. *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (d. Amirpour, 2014), as critic Sheila O'Malley attests to, infuses multiple generic influences into its vampire narrative: "Spaghetti Westerns, 1950s juvenile delinquent movies, gearhead movies, teenage rom-coms, the Iranian new wave" (O'Malley, 2014). The engagement with traits from multiple genres in *Under the Skin*, then, does not preclude it from discussions of elevated horror. On the contrary, it enhances the film's connection to the cycle.

While not solely horror narratives, the book and film adaptation of *Under the Skin* both engage with recognizable conventions of the horror genre. First, and perhaps paramount to any definition of horror, is the existence of the monstrous within the narrative. As Noel Carroll argues, the presence of a monster is not in and of itself an indication that a story is part of the horror genre. The monster in horror, for Carroll, must fulfill specific characteristics. The monster in horror presents or represents a disturbance of "the natural order," breaching "the norms of ontological propriety presumed by the positive human characters in the story" (Carroll, 1990, p. 16). Carroll focuses on the affective responses of characters to this disturbing monstrosity.

This is an idea which Glazer complicates in *Under the Skin*. The character of Isserley is an alien monster by the Carrollian definition, but Isserley is made to appear as

a human. Characters coaxed into Isserley's vehicle are not horrified by her image, because Isserley has been medically reconstructed to resemble what they recognize to be a human woman. Underneath this human disguise, Isserley is a black, featureless figure. People are lured into the orbit of Isserley through her manufactured appearance of normalcy. Nevertheless, Isserley disturbs the natural order through this disguise, and the reader/viewer has the knowledge to identify this disturbance where most characters in the book/film do not. Using Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger* as a guide, Carroll presents monstrosity as being something which is a sort of "category mistake," a creature which is interstitial and thus exists as categorically impure (1990, pp. 31-32). Isserley is visibly represented as both human and alien, as existing between the boundaries of the known and the unknown, the worldly and the otherworldly. While this defines Isserley as a monster under Carroll's definition, both the book and the film use the interstitial space of the character's identity and the impurity it elicits to present themes of belonging, isolation, and (for lack of a better term) humanity.

Second, both the book and the film present images of visceral and abject bodily harm. They do so in different ways, but both are adequately grotesque enough for the genre of horror. The film depicts the capture of Isserley's male victims as them sinking into a pool of black liquid. Underneath the surface they float, trapped, as if marinating in the inky pool as their bodies mutate to resemble something boneless and inhuman. In the book, the function of their capture is made more explicit. The victims are penned like cattle underground. They are explicitly referenced as "livestock," as they are harvested

for their meat, which is considered a delicacy on this race of alien's home planet. Over time, they are mutated to maximize the production of meat:

> The few remaining monthlings [human victims] were huddled together in a mound of fast-panting flesh, the divisions between one muscle-bound body and the next difficult to distinguish, the limbs confused. Hands and feet spasmed at random, as if a co-ordinated response were struggling vainly to emerge from a befuddled collective organism. Their fat little heads were identical, swaying in a cluster like polyps of an anemone, blinking stupidly in the sudden light. You would never guess they'd have the cunning to run if released.
>
> All around the monthlings, their thick spiky carpet of straw glistened with the dark diarrhoea of ripeness. Nothing which might cause the slightest harm to human digestion survived in their massive guts; every foreign microbe had been purged and replaced with only the best and most well-trusted bacteria. They clung to each other, as if to keep their numbers undiminished. There were four of them left; yesterday there had been five, the day before, six. (Faber, 2000, p. 181).

Where the film adaptation is more abstract in its depiction of the victims—one shot of liquid human remains draining down a conveyer belt is the most explicit image of their fate—the book presents a more direct and disturbing timeline of the victims' grisly fate. Both adhere to what Julia Kristeva articulates as eliciting the abjection at the heart of horror, as the depictions of humans being made cattle disturbs "identity, system, order" (Kristeva, 1980, p. 4).

On both points, the depiction of the monstrous and the depiction of the abject, *Under the Skin* is revealed to be a narrative about interstitiality and boundary transference. Unlike traditional interstitial monstrosity, which often manifests physically, the interstitiality of Isserley is manifested both physically and psychologically. In this way, *Under the Skin* is a horror narrative about psychological states, as per the definition of elevated horror I have outlined. In the film, Isserley is an alien sent to lure men into a van for the purposes of farming them as mentioned above. Through the course of doing this work, she becomes curious about the nature of human life and, eventually, absconds from her duties. After failed attempts to properly assimilate into human life through acts like eating and sex, Isserley is assaulted and set on fire in the woods. The character's arc could be viewed as a shift from alien to human.[12] The categorical impurity that defines her as a horror monster in the first half of the film is re-negotiated in the second half as an unfixed boundary. Her character is shown not to be a static interstitial between the recognizable human and the alien Other. Instead, her story is one of reconciling the boundary between the two and attempting to realize her identity and the extent of her agency within her environment.[13]

This shift is evidenced in the film with a pair of rather overt images that come after Isserley sets one of her victims free. The first is a closeup of her looking in a mirror—it is a somewhat Lacanian recognition of her human appearance (Fig. 1.4). The second is an extreme long shot of her abandoning her van in the foggy road and walking out of the fog

[12] One could also make the case for the film as a feminist text. Although, Glazer himself has commented on his intentions to make a film reflecting a human experience rather than a gendered one (F.S., 2014)

[13] Another worthwhile reading pertaining to categorical boundaries in the *Under the Skin* book comes from Sarah Dillon (2011).

(Fig. 1.5). In these shots, Isserley is shown as identifying as a human woman instead of a featureless alien and walking, literally and figuratively, towards clarity. Of course, her attempt to broach this boundary and become part of human society is unsuccessful. She attempts and fails to coexist, and she remains a cold observer of humanity, unable to fully comprehend human emotion. This is much different from the book, in which the interiority provided to the character shows the physical and emotional suffering that has resulted from her transformation into a human figure and the isolation that comes with it. The book also juxtaposes this sympathetic read on the character with brief glimpses at the internal monologues of her victims, who are by and large depicted as dehumanizing and unsympathetic figures. In doing this, Faber depicts Isserley as a sympathetic protagonist from the outset, whereas Glazer's film makes this protagonist status less clear-cut.

Fig. 1.4: Isserley recognizes her human face in the mirror.

Fig. 1.5: Isserley's path is clear as she abandons her kidnapping duties.

Unlike a traditional horror narrative, there is in *Under the Skin* a graying of moral culpability and a complication of audience alignment. Without the internal monologuing of the novel, the moral implications of Isserley's actions are harsher and more pronounced in the film. At the same time, the narrative presents a character arc for Isserley that allows the viewer to shift their alignment as the alien character transforms from an antagonist to a protagonist. These complications emphasize the psychological dimensions of Isserley's character. Rather than relying on the depiction of the alien Other as being monstrous, the film depends on the audience engaging with the Carrollian monster as something more psychologically complex. Thus, the narrative of *Under the Skin* is a signal of the elevated horror narratives to come.

The film version of *Under the Skin* is also stylistically adherent to the characteristics of elevated horror (i.e., an emphasis on mood and shot composition rather than on "jump scare" mechanics, deliberate pacing often leading to a rapidly paced climax, a discordant soundtrack, symmetrical or otherwise centered framing, and the use of deliberate camera movement).

Given the noticeable absence of scare tactics, *Under the Skin* is not a traditional horror film. Instead, *Under the Skin* is a mood piece. Glazer uses the climate and natural surroundings of Scotland as an atmospheric mood setter. The Scotland Isserley finds herself in is dreary, gray, wet, and frigid. There is little about the environment that would be inviting to an outsider like her. The realism that is introduced through this use of natural locations is at odds with the artificial and somewhat inexplicable monochromatic voids that Glazer inserts into the film. The white void in which Isserley is introduced, stripping the clothes off a corpse, is an abstract and alien space, and it is unclear where this space is in relation to other locations in the film. The black void to which Isserley brings her victims is contained within an earthly space, given that she leads the men into a building before the film cuts to the tar-colored pool of liquid (Fig. 1.6-1.7). However, the room looks unnatural, and it feels out of place inside a manmade structure. Both the natural and alien settings provide an uninviting atmosphere, which helps to establish an uncomfortable and off-putting mood. This mood is amplified by Mica Levi's unsettling score, which incorporates distorted strings and spare percussion rhythms. It is a soundtrack which occasionally approaches the feeling of a melodic line but that relies heavily on the absence of harmony and the dead space between notes.

Fig. 1.6: One of Isserley’s victims looks into the void.

Fig. 1.7: An alien space inside a manmade structure.

Camera movement plays a small yet notable role in the film. The first time we see Isserley within human society, she is walking through a crowded mall. A slow tracking shot captures this moment for a substantial amount of time, showing Isserley blending into the human world. At this point in the film, she is positioned as an unknown threat, a creature walking among people in the same sinister way that the aliens in *They Live* (d. Carpenter, 1988) are wolves in sheep's clothing. We are then introduced to her van and, shortly thereafter, her modus operandi. Deliberate pans from Isserley's POV show her scanning men as they walk by, searching for her first victim. It is, as a large portion of the film will be, an illustration of Laura Mulvey's gaze theory. Her potential victims, once inside the van, will exercise the male gaze, oblivious to the fact that she was the first to

gaze upon them. The camera's alignment with her gaze is a telling reversal of the male gaze, and it sets up Isserley's later attempt to shed from her identity the interstitiality that defines her as a monster. The camera, and thus the viewer, is situated within Isserley's gaze, implicating the viewer in her villainous actions. This is similar to the usage of POV in traditional horror narratives, in which the camera positions itself behind the eyes of the masked killer. In the case of Isserley's arc of attempting to shed this monstrous interstitiality from her identity, the use of gazing and POV suggests a further complication of traditional horror tropes.

Glazer often employs centered compositions when shooting outside of the van. Inside the van, there is one camera setup which symmetrically frames the driver and passenger, but most of the other angles are more tightly framed and sharply angled by necessity, given that the camera placements within the van were accomplished using discreet, tiny digital cameras (Connor, 2016). The sequences in the van, as J.D. Connor puts it, were a "throwback to a sort of verité guerrilla filmmaking" in pursuit of "real" interactions with Glaswegian men (2016). This verité style is less adherent to the style of elevated horror, but Glazer returns to the elevated horror aesthetic with austere centered compositions in locations like the black void. Using POV again, the camera centers on the images of Isserley and her victims as they slowly disrobe and walk towards the dark pool that will ensnare the men. These repetitive sequences culminate in Isserley releasing one of her victims, in which the centered shot on Isserley is no longer her fabricated human form but her black, featureless alien body. This shot dissolves into a

superimposition of the inky body over her human face (Fig. 1.8), illustrating once again her desire to separate the categorical impurity which defines her identity.

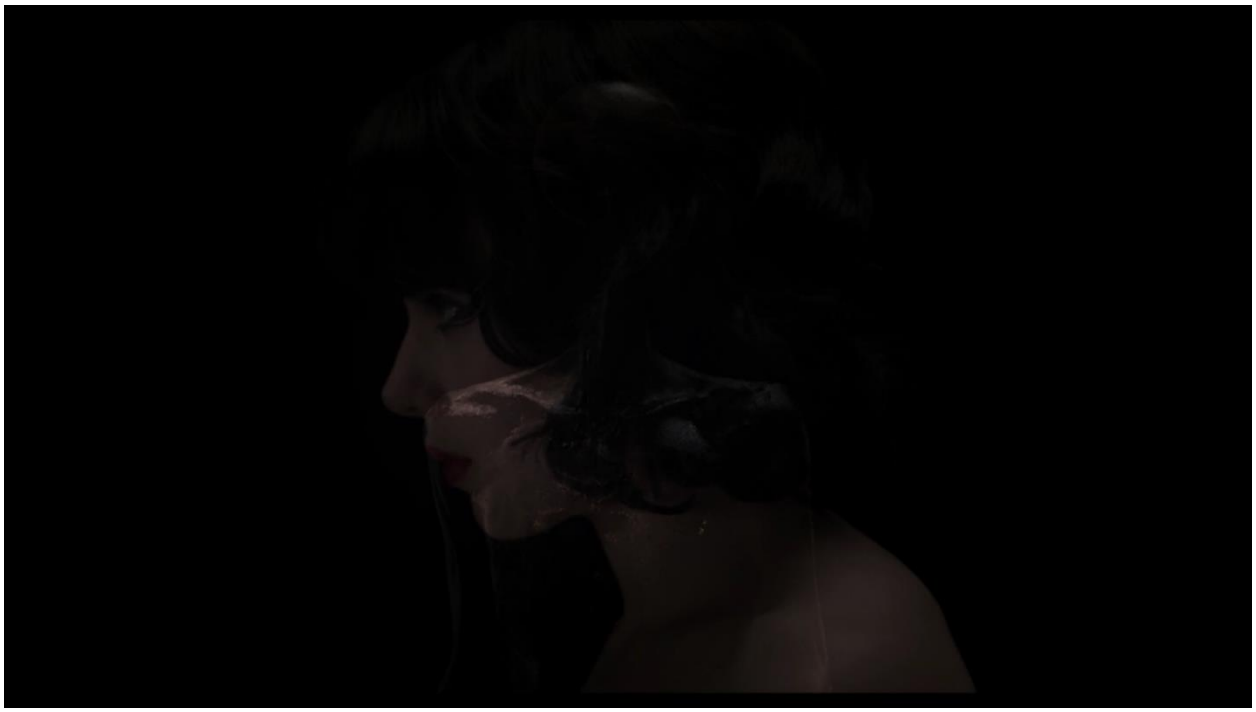

Fig. 1.8: The duality of Isserley's identity superimposed.

As this analysis shows, the elements of style which are shared with elevated horror play directly into the psychological bent of the film's narrative. If *Under the Skin* is to be viewed as a sort of proto-elevated horror film, this interrelation of narrative and style illustrates the points of divergence from non-elevated horror. Traditional horror films released in the same decade as the elevated horror cycle—films like *Paranormal Activity 3* (d. Joost and Schulman, 2011), *The Conjuring* (d. Wan, 2013), and *A Quiet Place* (d. Krasinski, 2018)—do not produce the same aesthetic. These films create tension around set pieces which often culminate in jump scares and rely on narratives

with external conflicts involving common forms of Carrollian monstrosity. Elevated horror is grounded in the traditions of horror, in that it often engages with notions of monstrosity and abjection. However, it does so through non-traditional means. The "monsters" in *The Babadook* and *It Comes at Night* (d. Shults, 2017) are manifestations of characters' disturbed psyches. In *The Witch*, the monster is not the central horrifying object of the film, but a catalyst for the psychological torment which is the central horror. Depictions of the abject are present in films like *The Witch*, *Raw* (d. Ducournau, 2017) and *Midsommar* (d. Aster, 2019), but they are used sparingly in comparison to the Grand Guignol sensibilities of the "neo-grindhouse" (Wharton, 2013). Even *Suspiria* (d. Guadagnino, 2018), an elevated horror remake of a *giallo* film very much in the Grand Guignol tradition, builds most of its horror through atmosphere until the indulgent, violent climax. In all of these cases, elevated horror is a reconfiguration of horror conventions that emphasizes psychological narratives and style over scares. The characteristic style of elevated horror sets these films apart from other contemporary horror cinema.

A FILM FOR THE "COGNESCENTI:" A RECEPTION STUDY

A divisive film from its festival appearances onward, *Under the Skin* was met by critics with much anticipation and a variety of opinions. Not all critics found the psychological premise described above compelling. Todd McCarthy at *The Hollywood Reporter* called the film a "purely visual experience without dramatic, emotional or psychological substance" whose "approach to the subject [of shared traits between

species] is so shadowy and imprecise … as to strip it of much tangible meaning at all" (McCarthy, 2013). Scott Foundas at *Variety* saw no psychological depth underneath the surface of the film, comparing seeing the world through the eyes of an alien to that of a sociopath with "Johansson doing her best to convey varying degrees of blankness and incomprehension at her own actions and those of others" (Foundas, 2013). Scott Feinberg, too, saw no psychological substance in the film, which he called "plotless and pretentious" (Feinberg, 2013). Justin Chang, writing of the film's screening at the Venice Film Festival for *Variety,* labeled *Under the Skin* "the most polarizing picture of the [2013] festival season so far, variously hailed as a masterpiece or dismissed as an abomination, depending on whom you're talking to" (Chang, 2013). According to his account, one of the film's screenings at Venice was met with "a smattering of boos mixed in with enthusiastic applause" (Chang, 2013).

The divisive spread of the critical reception carried over from its festival run to its initial theatrical release. There was certainly not enough rapturous critical praise to cross *Under the Skin* over into a mainstream hit. Audiences, it seemed, did not know what to make of the film. Using the internet archiving tool "The Wayback Machine," one can trace a small initial buzz of anticipation in the U.S. prior to the film's release, which peters out into a mixed response as the film made its way in and out of theaters. On March 31, one week before the film's U.S. release, review aggregator site Rotten Tomatoes logged that 94% of 7,519 users expressed interest in seeing the film (Fig. 1.9). Following the weekend of April 4—the film's limited opening in Los Angeles and New York—62% of 9,551 viewers liked the film (Fig. 1.10). By the end of the film's U.S.

theatrical release in August, that number had dropped to 54% out of 27,723 viewers (Fig. 1.11). The film's Rotten Tomatoes user score as of this writing is 55% out of 36,574 viewers. [14] Its IMDb user score: a 6.2 rating out of 10 based on 128,017 user votes. The film-centric social media platform Letterboxd gives the film a user score of 3.7 out of 5. Letterboxd caters to a more cinephile audience than aggregator sites like Rotten Tomatoes and Metacritic, with users writing reviews that Scott Tobias at *The Ringer* describes as "casual, personal shorthand that's aimed squarely at the cognoscenti" (Tobias, 2020). This may explain its slightly elevated rating for *Under the Skin*.

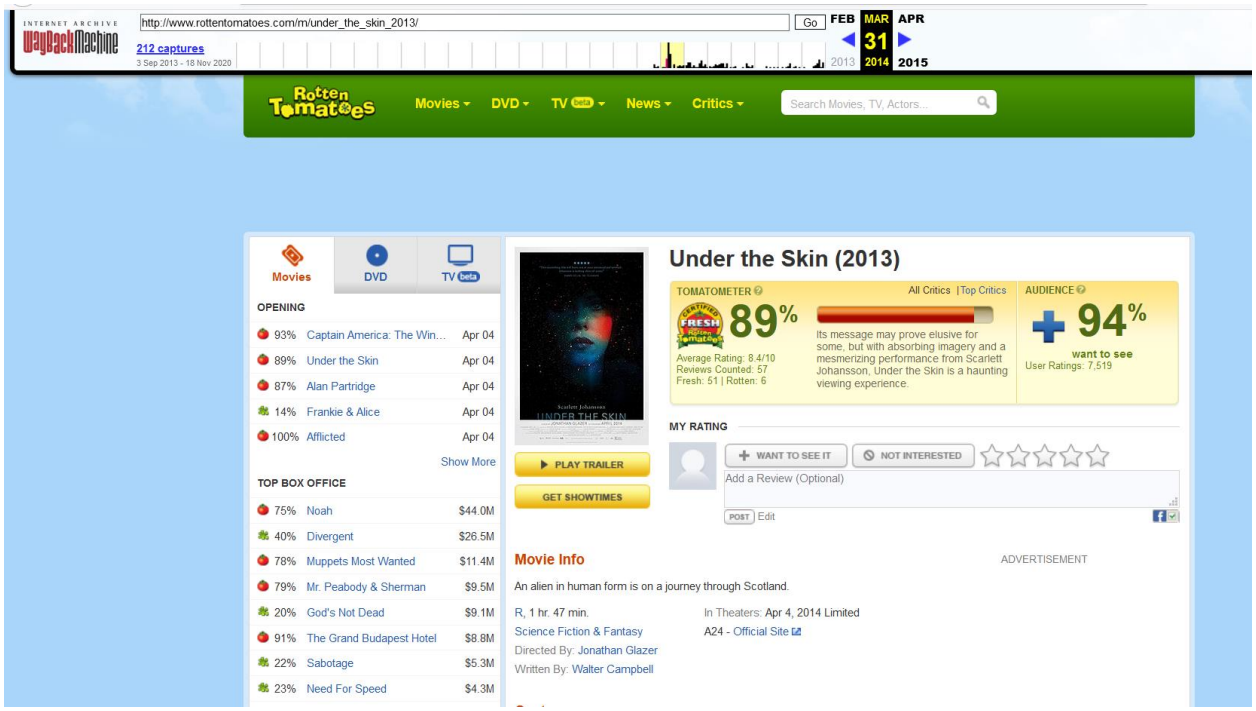

Fig. 1.9: Rotten Tomatoes, March 31, 2014

[14] Numbers in this section were last accessed on November 19, 2020.

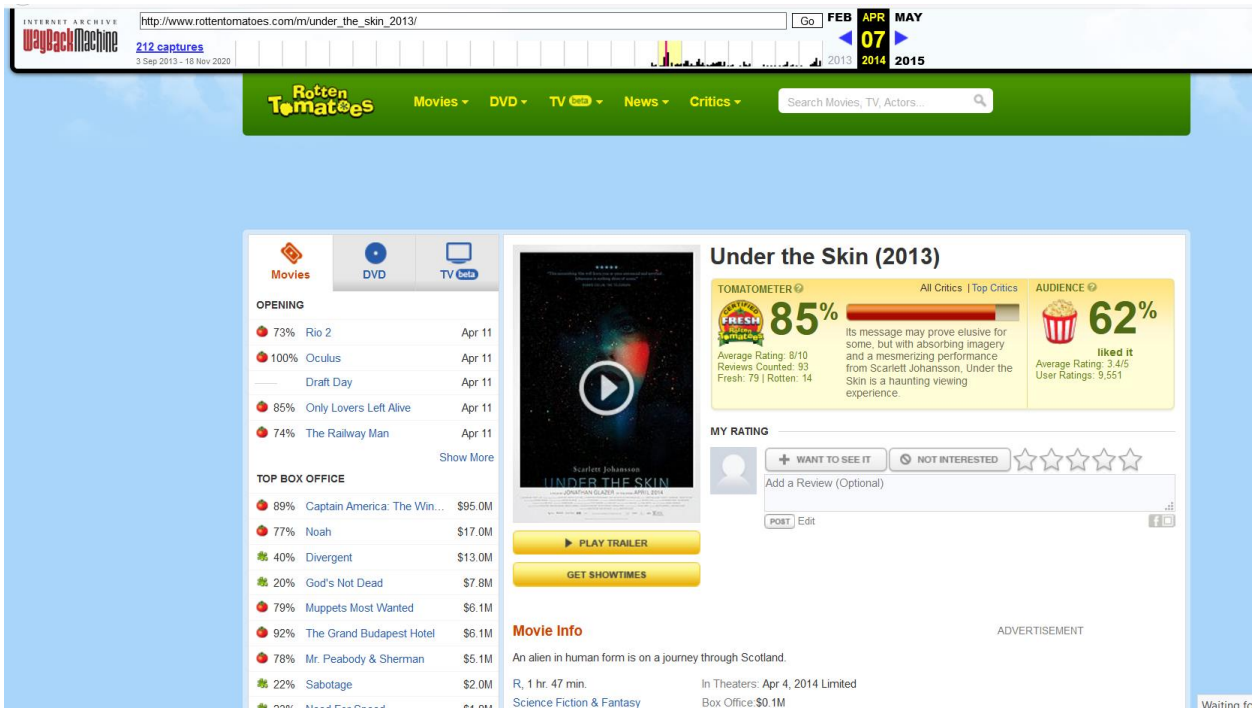

Fig. 1.10: Rotten Tomatoes, April 07, 2014

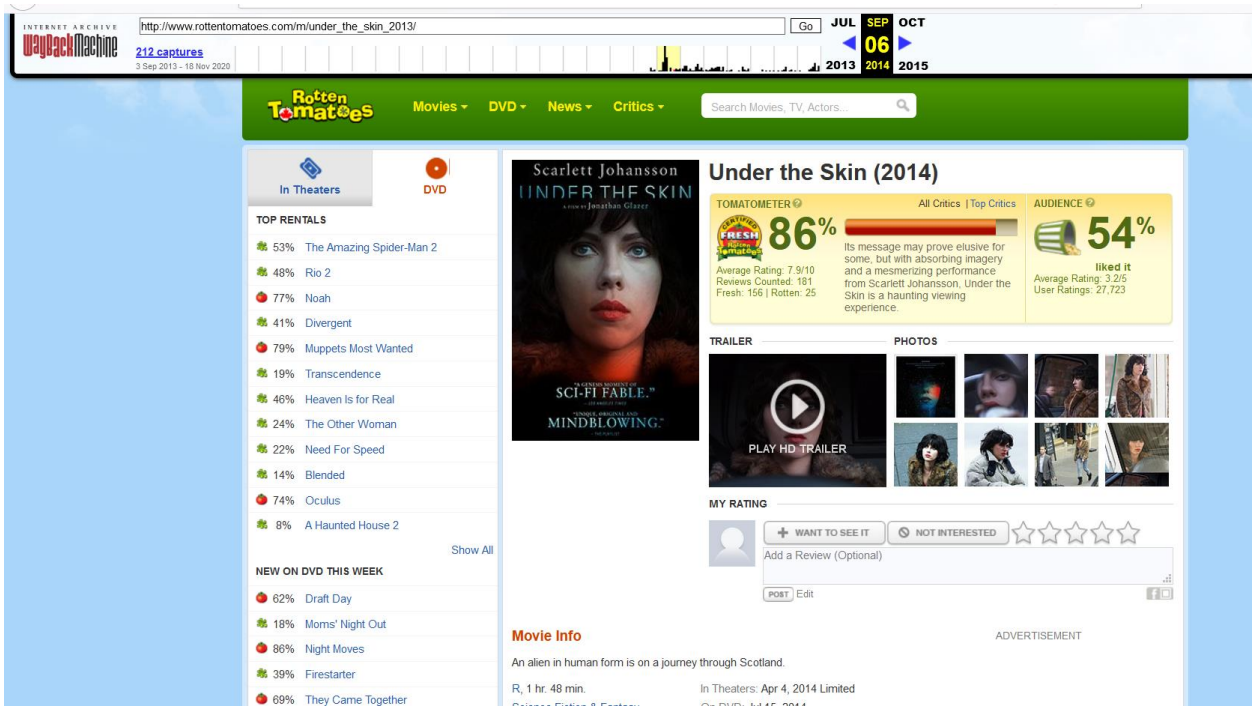

Fig. 1.11: Rotten Tomatoes, September 06, 2014

Speculating on these numbers, I extract two main points. First, that the avant-garde aspect of the film, which A24 downplayed in its marketing, led to a mixed reaction by critics and moviegoers alike, impacting its meager box office returns. Many critics seeing the film at festivals, even those who enjoyed the film, made comments in their reviews prognosticating that the film's box office ceiling was low (Feinberg, 2013; Chang, 2013; Foundas, 2013; McCarthy, 2013). Eric Kohn at *IndieWire*, curiously enough, claimed that the film would "yield solid box office returns on opening weekend" while also admitting that word of mouth on the film was mixed (Kohn, 2013). The film totaled $7.2 million worldwide, with only $2.6 million coming from North America. This

leads to a second important point: while *Under the Skin* proved to be a mark against the A24 founders' "anything can crossover" philosophy, the company appeared undeterred by the film's inability to transcend minor critical acclaim and a small cult fanbase. *Under the Skin* would instead be emblematic of A24's approach to genre cinema moving forward. This is not surprising, considering the stylistic approach to genre is what most critics were drawn to.

Critics referenced a vast array of antecedents to Glazer's formalist take on genre in *Under the Skin*—citing directors like David Lynch, Nicolas Roeg, and Stanley Kubrick. Some, like Foundas and Matt Zoller Seitz, linked the van sequences to Abbas Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry* (1997). Yet the generic novelty of the film remained at the forefront of most reviews. "It doesn't move or feel like most science fiction movies—like most movies, period," Seitz claimed (2013). *Chicago Tribune* critic Michael Phillips commented on how what he described as "a blend of gritty neorealism … and modestly scaled, elegantly wrought fantasy" rendered the science fiction unconventional and unpredictable (2014). Peter Bradshaw at *The Guardian* commented on the fear and eroticism of the film, while also making mention of a "dog-whistle of absurdist humour … inaudible for some American reviewers" (2014). McCarthy said of the film, "the mood is quiet and strong, pregnant with threat, not of horror film-like violence but of unexpected images and psychosexual freakiness" (2013), illustrating the moody, style-driven brand of horror that would become synonymous with elevated horror. Both those critics who lauded the film and those that disparaged it agreed that the elusiveness of its genre was one of its most prominent features.

The genre hybridity of *Under the Skin*—which A24 did not depict in its marketing, instead presenting something slightly more generically conventional—played a prominent role in the film's critical reception. The importance of genre to the production, promotion, and reception of the film marks the release of *Under the Skin* as a crucial point in the timeline of A24 despite the film's mixed reception and lack of financial success. Moving forward, genre hybrid films continued to be a major part of A24's library and house style. Furthermore, as this chapter has outlined, A24's reconceptualization of genre in its marketing points to branding practices that the company continued to exercise as it gained a loyal core fanbase and increased notoriety in the independent sector.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, *Under the Skin* can be viewed as a significant precursor to a number of developments relevant to this study. First, it presented many of the formal aspects which would become standard for the elevated horror cycle. The psychological interpretation of horror conventions, most notably, is a narrative trait contained within most elevated horror films. It could be argued that this is the trait which effectively "elevates" the horror genre by presenting itself as something more substantive and serious than a cut-and-paste monster story. The narrative's play with genre is also an element which carries over into other films of the elevated horror cycle. The film also implements elements of style—a moody atmosphere, symmetrical shot compositions, and a dissonant score—which will crop up in future elevated horror films.

Second, A24's marketing of the film is demonstrative of tactics the company continued to employ with their genre films moving forward. The company's marketing for *Under the Skin* presented the film as something more akin to an erotic thriller than an art-house genre film about human identity. Trailers for A24's horror films continued to exploit the presentation of genre as a means of courting audiences beyond their cinephile niche in the pursuit of crossover hits. They did so, however, in a way that also aimed to prevent alienating this niche. The trailer for a film like *It Comes at Night* (d. Shults, 2017), for example, carefully used imagery from the film to suggest that there is a monstrous and perhaps supernatural force that terrorizes the characters at night. In the film's actual diegesis, the only "Its" that come at night are familial strife, psychological stress, and the fear of the Other. The film was not the monster movie the title and trailer suggested; it was a psychological horror film about fear, paranoia, and self-preservation. By repurposing the iconography in these films for their promotional materials, A24 reconstructed the films to appear more mainstream than they actually were. The commercial incentives of the company are clear in this respect.

It is not a novelty to use marketing to present a product as something that it is not, but A24 does it in such a way as to not sacrifice its brand identity as a caterer to a more exclusive and "in the know" cineaste audience. The marketing materials for *Under the Skin* may attempt to reach for a broader audience by presenting something generically recognizable, but the film itself challenges the confines of genre in a way that the casual moviegoer may not appreciate. The disparity between the Letterboxd and Rotten Tomatoes user scores bear this distinction out—although I admit these sites' abilities to

survey audiences are limited in scope. The Letterboxd user who meticulously rates and logs all the films they watch is perhaps more likely than the casual Rotten Tomatoes user to identify as part of the indie taste culture to which A24 brands itself. Thus, the average user score for *Under the Skin* being higher on Letterboxd reflects an appreciation of this challenging genre hybridity on the part of A24's core, niche fanbase. It also is indicative of the company's failure to sell the film to a mainstream audience.

Third, *Under the Skin* can be viewed as a template for future horror films distributed by A24. Genre is a crucial component to the company's output. Elevated horror, more than any other genre, is at the core of the company's house style. This chapter has outlined the traits of elevated horror present in *Under the Skin*, traits which will reappear in future A24 horror films. The company's commitment to the elevated horror aesthetic will be assessed in more depth in the following chapters, starting with one of the elevated horror cycle's biggest success stories, *The Witch* (d. Eggers, 2016).

Chapter 2: *The Witch* and the Cultural Emergence of Elevated Horror

This chapter examines the outcomes of the financial and critical success of *The Witch* (d. Eggers, 2016), assessing the extent to which the film and A24's involvement in its release influenced the cultural visibility of elevated horror. Through analyses of trade and popular press discourses surrounding *The Witch* and other elevated horror films released around the same time period—namely, *It Follows* (d. Mitchell, 2015) and *Get Out* (d. Peele, 2017)—I make the case that the cultural awareness of the nascent elevated horror trend was accelerated by the release of *The Witch*. In addition, I argue that A24's marketing and distribution strategies are crucial to consider when looking at the elevated horror cycle. Using textual analyses of *The Witch* and A24's marketing materials for the film, as well as a discourse analysis of articles written about the elevated horror trend, A24's centrality to the cycle can be effectively illustrated.

The Witch premiered at Sundance on January 27, 2015 to much fanfare. To critics who reviewed it, it was a smart blend of supernatural horror and psychological drama (Chang, 2015; Smith, 2015; Kohn, 2015). The initial reviews heralded the film as an accomplished debut for writer-director Robert Eggers. This praise was affirmed when Sundance awarded Eggers its Directing Award, citing his work on the film as "a consistent and excellently rendered vision … masterfully executed" (*Sundance Film Festival*). A24 swooped into a bidding war for the film which included IFC and Magnolia (Kit, 2015), ultimately securing U.S. rights for the film for a reported $1.5 million (Lang

& Setoodeh, 2015). With this deal, one of the "most-buzzed about" films of Sundance 2015 was going to receive a sizeable theatrical release with a substantial marketing campaign (Tallerico, 2016).

This whirlwind of events was about as good a debut as a first-time feature director could hope for. Eggers began his career in theater working as a director, production designer, and costume designer, then he moved into film production in the mid-2000s. His first two films as a director were shorts adapted from the Edgar Allan Poe gothic "The Tell-Tale Heart" and the fairy tale "Hansel & Gretel." These short films reveal the theme that Eggers is most fascinated by as a filmmaker: the past. *The Witch* embodies this fascination quite clearly. The premise—a family is cast out of society for their radical religious views and sets out for a remote cabin, where they are preyed upon by a witch who resides in the nearby woods—is reminiscent of the Brothers Grimm fairy tales. *The Witch* is a folklore-inspired horror story which depicts Puritanical New England in the 1630s with intricately researched period-accurate language, a facet which made the film stand out from other contemporary horror cinema. The film is as much a period piece and a family drama as it is a horror film, and Eggers would likely be the first to point this out. He describes his inspiration for the film as wanting "to make this archetypal New England horror story … a nightmare from the past, like a Puritan's nightmare that you could upload into the mind's eye" (Bitel, 2016). When asked, following the release of *The Witch,* if he would continue making horror films, Eggers responded, "the past is the genre I am most enamored with … if that's a genre" (Weston, 2016). With the praise bestowed upon him by critics and the goodwill built with A24 through the box office

performance of *The Witch*, Eggers would be given the opportunity to make even more ambitious films in the "genre" of the past, *The Lighthouse* (2019) and *The Northman* (currently in post-production).

The reception of *The Witch* at Sundance may have been overwhelmingly positive, but critics nevertheless predicted that the film would struggle to draw a mainstream audience. As with A24's previous genre film, *Under the Skin* (d. Glazer, 2013), aspects of *The Witch* which would categorize it as elevated horror were deemed less accessible than traditional horror. Todd McCarthy wrote in *The Hollywood Reporter* that "Eggers' debut feature impresses on several fronts … but the overall effect is relatively subdued and muted, probably too much so for mainstream scare fans" (2015). He predicted the film would achieve cult status and "nice [box office] returns in smartly judged specialized release" (2015). Justin Chang at *Variety* remarked similarly, speculating that the film's "formal, stylized direction and austere approach to genre" would "translate appreciative reviews into specialized box-office success" (2015). *The New York Post*'s Kyle Smith claimed the film's "arty elements (slow pace, British accents, that impenetrable dialogue) prevent it from being sold as a straight-up horror show" (2015). In all of these cases, doubt was cast on the mainstream potential for this horror trend, which was not yet being called elevated horror. Brian Tallerico had dubbed films like *It Follows*, *The Babadook*, and *The Witch* as a "new wave horror movement," while other writers threw out the term "renaissance" (Tallerico, 2016).[15] The formal elements of

[15] There is evidence to suggest that talk of a trend in "elevated horror" began in the months following the release of *The Witch*. The term "elevated horror" is, at least as it pertains to use by spectators and popular press writers, relatively new to the discourse of horror cinema. Articles appearing as early as 2017 directly

elevated horror in *The Witch* were viewed by critics as too restrained when compared to the heavily punctuated, cacophonous scare tactics of the film's contemporaries—e.g., *The Conjuring* (d. Wan, 2013); *Sinister* (d. Derrickson, 2012); and the *Paranormal Activity* franchise.

In the case of *Under the Skin*, this doubt proved to be well-founded, as that film was a substantial failure at the box office. *The Witch*, however, experienced a much different theatrical life. The film turned a healthy profit with a worldwide gross of $40.4 million, making it, at the time, the biggest financial success story of this "new wave horror" trend.[16] The film debuted in 2,046 theaters, the most for any A24 film to that point (Lang, 2016), defying the critics' expectations with a more ambitious distribution strategy than all previous films in the elevated horror cycle. Even Eggers commented that prior to A24 acquiring the film, he anticipated it would receive a limited theatrical release in Los Angeles and New York before being shopped to streaming services (Tallerico, 2016). Instead, A24 took a big swing with a non-traditional genre property, which fits into their M.O. as a disruptor in the indie scene.

The result of this swing may have been financially fruitful, but the audience response to the film was not unilaterally positive. Again, A24 cornered itself into a similar marketing trap as it had with *Under the Skin*. As will be discussed in more detail in the following section, the company marketed *The Witch* as a somewhat standard

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address the rising popularity in the phrase to describe films like *The Babadook* (d. Kent, 2014), *The Witch*, *mother!* (d. Aronofsky, 2017), and *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (d. Lanthimos, 2017) (Zeitchik, 2017; Shepherd, 2017).

[16] Unless otherwise stated, box office information is taken from The Numbers (https://www.the-numbers.com/).

monster story. Audiences expecting to see a traditional horror film were met with something that instead required more patience to fully enjoy. CinemaScore, a company which polls theatrical viewers' reactions to films, scored *The Witch* a C- (Sharf, 2018). In general, CinemaScore grades are viewed as a barometer for whether a film meets the expectations of opening night audiences, which are often comprised of those most excited to see the film. Low CinemaScore scores are a fate that befalls many films of the elevated horror cycle which receive a wide theatrical release[17]—*It Comes at Night* (D), *mother!* (F), *Annihilation* (C), *Hereditary* (D+), *Midsommar* (C+), *Gretel & Hansel* (C-). In the case of *The Witch*, the marketing is the likely culprit for some audience members' expectations going unmet. And while CinemaScore is too small of a sample size to gauge a consensus audience reaction, low ratings are often highly publicized in a manner that can stigmatize a film and harm its word of mouth. For *The Witch*, the C- was low enough for some journalists to take note, particularly when it came to box office analysis. Scott Mendelson at *Forbes* and Brent Lang at *Variety* both mentioned the score in their box office reporting (Lang, 2016a; Mendelson, 2016), with Mendelson saying that, despite the film performing well in its opening weekend, he was "genuinely surprised it didn't get an F [from CinemaScore]" (2016).

For A24, low audience scores are not necessarily a detriment to its branding. Given that the company's stated goal is to bring art-house movies into the multiplex (Lee, 2013), this appears to be a paradoxical claim. However, when it comes to this goal, the

[17] CinemaScore does not poll films which release on under 1,500 screens unless contracted by a private entity (CinemaScore, n.d.).

company has two separate audiences, and the strategies by which they court each audience is quite different. On the one hand, for A24 to be presentable as a prestige, hip indie studio it must ingratiate itself to the "indie taste culture" niche. This requires the company to acquire and distribute content which is "cutting edge" and oppositional to mainstream cinema. Its horror content certainly fits this bill, and this contributes to those films' lack of mainstream audience appeal. On the other hand, the "taste culture" brand identity does not require the endorsement of mainstream moviegoers, but the company nevertheless wants that audience to purchase tickets to its films.

This idea is put into a more explicit context by film critic David Ehrlich, whose profile of A24 in 2015 references dissatisfaction from consumers over misrepresentation of the film *Spring Breakers* in online marketing. "[I]t became clear when I spoke to the company's employees," Ehrlich writes, "[that A24] saw *Spring Breakers* as a Trojan horse for progressive cinema—the company was less concerned about the nine kids who found the film too weird than they were the one kid who went home and rented *Gummo*" (2015). In this hypothetical equation, one viewer became part of A24's niche fanbase after seeing *Spring Breakers*, nine did not, but nevertheless all 10 paid to see the film. The viral marketing campaign succeeded in piquing people's interests, even if it did so by selling the film as something it was not. Of course, the more business a film does in theaters, the more attractive it appears as part of the company's growing library of indie titles, whose rights can be sold off to streaming services at high premiums. Add to this critical praise and the potential for accolades like Academy Awards, and A24's brand name begins to become synonymous with quality, further cementing the lucrative status

of its library and putting the company in a good position to become a significant player in the independent sector.

2016 was a watershed year for A24 in this regard. This was the first year the company walked away from the awards season with Oscar gold. Three films from A24's 2015 slate won Academy Awards—*Amy* (d. Kapadia) won Best Documentary Feature, *Ex Machina* (d. Garland) won Best Visual Effects, and Brie Larson won Best Actress for her performance in *Room* (d. Abrahamson).[18] *Room* was also nominated for Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Adapted Screenplay. This success at the Academy Awards likely increased the visibility of A24's brand. The cachet these awards carry often reflects the attitude that an award-winning indie film is "more legitimate" and "mature" than its mainstream multiplex counterpart (Newman, 2011, p. 48). Winning awards helps to confirm a film's alternative status to mainstream blockbuster cinema, which allows A24 to court the desirable, young indie taste culture audience. At the same time, the primetime television platform provided by the Academy Awards can also increase the mainstream visibility of a film and its studio.[19] This works to satisfy A24's other branding goal, which is to attract the attention of a broader audience made up of more casual moviegoers than the indie taste culture niche. Becoming a household name through a consistent slate of award-winning product is one way of convincing the mainstream moviegoer to see the company's films in theaters.

[18] In an awards season campaign that ultimately made her an A-list star, Larson also won the Golden Globe, BAFTA, Screen Actors Guild, and Indie Spirit awards for the role.

[19] The Oscars telecast also reaches an older demographic than the company's targeted online marketing, an audience more likely than gen Zers to be tuning into a live televised event.

The release of *The Witch* was also a sizable step forward for A24 in terms of attracting these two audiences and establishing itself as a significant independent company. The critical praise for the film, matched with the successful theatrical run that made it the company's highest-grossing film at the time, proved to be a boon for both A24 as a brand and elevated horror as a recognizable style. To put it another way, A24 pursuing its corporate mandates with *The Witch* inadvertently accelerated the visibility of elevated horror to the point where, in a matter of years, it became a recognizable subgenre and a crucial talking point in the discourse of contemporary horror cinema.

PSYCHOLOGY, MONSTROSITY, AND THE MAINSTREAMING OF *THE WITCH*

A24 often engages in offbeat forms of viral marketing to promote their films. While promoting the film *Ex Machina* (d. Garland, 2014) at SXSW, the company created a fake profile on the dating app Tinder featuring a bot resembling the android character from the film, played by Alicia Vikander (Plaugic, 2015). To coincide with the release of *Midsommar* (d. Aster, 2019), the company released an upbeat online advertisement for a children's toy of a bear locked in a cage—a toy which it sold on its online shop for $42. A24 received minor publicity for two marketing stunts involving *The Witch*. One was an endorsement of the film from the Satanic Temple. The second was a Twitter account with tweets "authored" by the film's embodiment of evil, Black Phillip the goat. Stunts like these have provided A24 some publicity, mostly in the trade press, and they are marketing ploys aimed at the company's core cineaste audience who appreciate their ironic tone.

To reach an audience beyond this niche, A24 markets its films more traditionally. The theatrical trailer for *The Witch* presented the film as one of the scariest modern horror films. The advertisement quoted critics describing the film as "one of the most genuinely unnerving horror films in recent memory," "a nightmarish picture that will make your blood run cold," and "unforgettable, disturbing, [and] terrifying" (A24, 2015). Other promotional trailers used similar language from critics: "a new horror classic" (A24, 2016a), "a full-blown demonic possession fright fest" (A24, 2016b), and "you feel [watching the film] as if you've genuinely stepped into a nightmare" (A24, 2016c). Quotes like these increased expectations for the film by presenting it as the best and most terrifying horror movie of the year. This marketing also omitted certain aspects of the film which critics highlighted, aspects which may not have played to a broad audience. A number of critics described the film with terms that distanced it from contemporary blockbuster horror— "atmospheric,"[20] "slow-burn,"[21] "dread,"[22] "moody."[23] These descriptors painted *The Witch* as a much more deliberate and understated horror piece than the "fright fest" of which the trailer boasts.

The trailer does not shy away from the period setting of the film nor Eggers' colloquial dialogue, elements which could turn away mainstream viewers. However, it does situate *The Witch* as a "cabin in the woods" style supernatural horror. In doing so, it foregrounds the external threats of the film's diegesis and downplays the psychological,

[20] This term is used to describe the film in Chang, 2015; Kohn, 2015; Grierson, 2016; Callahan, 2016; Persall, 2016; Savlov, 2016; Bishop, 2016; Toppman, 2016.
[21] Used in Hoffman, 2015; Savlov, 2016; Lewis, 2016; Bishop, 2016
[22] Used in Kohn, 2015; Grierson, 2016; Cataldo, 2016; Callahan, 2016; Abele, 2016; Savlov, 2016; Lewis, 2016; Bishop, 2016
[23] Used in Abele, 2016; Nashawaty, 2016; Abrams, 2016; Anderson, 2016; Truitt, 2016

internal conflict posed by the film's family drama dimension. Quick cuts over a thunderous score depict the intensity of potential external conflicts, with the family's patriarch William (Ralph Ineson) drawing a rifle at an unseen target and his son Caleb (Harvey Scrimshaw) approaching a foreboding hovel in the woods (Fig. 2.1). It also shows shots from a scene in which Caleb is possessed, which culminates in the line "there's evil in the wood" over a black screen followed by an image of the witch. This sequence of shots, juxtaposed with the critics' quotes, pitches a terrifying monster story about a witch who haunts and attacks an isolated family.

Generally speaking, that illustration is accurate. The film's plot involves a witch who kidnaps and murders the family's newborn and, later, curses Caleb with an illness that ultimately kills him. But the presentation of the narrative in the marketing leaves out the element of psychological drama which lies at the heart of *The Witch*. The majority of the film centers on Thomasin (Anya Taylor-Joy), the family's eldest child, who is accused of practicing witchcraft and doing the evil deeds that caused her siblings' deaths. Suspicion and persecution are the main sources of conflict and tension, and the ramifications they have on the family build to the film's climax. During this sequence, Thomasin and her surviving siblings Mercy (Ellie Grainger) and Jonas (Lucas Dawson) are locked in a shed by their parents, who fear the devil may have come in the form of their goat Black Phillip and corrupted them. Black Phillip then gores William, killing him, and Thomasin is attacked by her mother Katherine (Kate Dickie), whom Thomasin kills in self-defense. Her family now dead, Thomasin decides to sign the devil's book and join the coven of witches of which she was previously accused of being a part. The

psychological toll of the events on Thomasin are as important to the narrative as the existence of a monstrous witch. It is in large part this psychological angle that preoccupies Eggers, and the folkloric monster in the woods functions as a catalyst for this drama. The witch of the title appears in only three brief scenes, with most other scenes depicting the increasing tensions among the family as supernatural occurrences raise characters' suspicions of one another.

The rapid sequencing in the trailer, which shows armed characters in the woods as though they are hunting the witch (Fig. 2.1), presents the film as more action-packed and tightly paced than it is. In the film itself, these scenes are quiet and deliberate, adding to the atmospheric quality which the marketing does not sell. Those who chose to see the film because of the trailers would be understandably disappointed when the film proved not to be an exciting, good-versus-evil monster movie, but instead a deliberately-paced examination of alienation and religious extremism in Puritanical New England and their effects on a family.

Fig. 2.1: These images from A24's official trailer exaggerate the extent to which the film’s narrative is propelled by external conflict.

The Witch is a good illustration of the characteristics of elevated horror laid out in this project's Introduction. The narrative is concerned with the psychological states of its characters in conjunction with depictions of the monstrous. The characters' choices ultimately lead the protagonist, Thomasin, to sign the devil's book and convene with a coven of witches in the woods in the film's denouement. And the climax features a Carrollian monster in the form of Black Phillip (it is a worldly creature inhabited by an otherworldly evil presence, thereby presenting as an interstitial impurity).[24] However, most of the narrative is driven by the characters' contrasting desires and how those desires are temptations which run counter to their religious beliefs. Mercy and Jonas, Thomasin's younger siblings, wish to punish their sister for her strict care of them. Thus, they perpetuate lies involving her exercising witchcraft and dealing with the devil, sowing distrust among the family. Thomasin, meanwhile, attempts to act honestly and in accordance with the family's religious precepts, only to find herself pushed to the brink by the accusations levied against her. This results in her abandonment of Puritanism and, in the wake of her family's death, an embrace of Paganism. Knowing that they are viewed as sins against God, Caleb attempts to suppress pubescent sexual urges. Following an incident with his father that causes him to lie to his mother (another sinful action), Caleb finds himself in the heart of the woods in the presence of the witch, who appears to him as a woman in her 20s. Caleb is seduced by this Pagan evil—he is, according to the screenplay, drawn in by "her hypnotic amber eyes" (Eggers, 2019 p. 80). He gives into temptation, allowing the witch to kiss him, an act which ultimately costs

[24] See: Carroll, 1990.

him his life. Katherine, the family's matriarch, suffocated by their exile and desiring to return to England, pushes back against the patriarchal structure of their household. She also admits to losing her faith in God after her baby, Samuel, is kidnapped. And William, the patriarch, quietly deceives Katherine in an effort to downplay the financial hardship they are facing due to the anemic yield of their crops. Having sold Katherine's silver cup, a prized family heirloom, he allows Thomasin to bear the brunt of the accusations as to its whereabouts.

In all of these cases, Eggers is presenting internal conflicts which are defined by the characters' strained relationships to both their religion and their immediate family, which rise to the surface in the wake of an external yet largely unseen monstrous presence. In this way, *The Witch* adheres to the elevated horror narrative, which relies on character psychology even when the monstrosity common to the horror genre is present. Only when the film reaches its climax does the pacing quicken and the conflict become more external and violent. This adheres to the general narrative framework of the elevated horror film, in which the deliberate pace and lack of excessive violence gives way to a rapid and oftentimes bloody climax.

The film's opening sequence establishes the elevated horror aesthetic quickly. Most shots in this opening are symmetrically framed, establishing each member of the family as they are tried for heresy to the Church (Fig. 2.2). The first shot that breaks from the pattern of straight-on, symmetrical shots comes when William accepts their banishment—the shot shows Thomasin in profile looking over at William in disbelief. This is a pointedly jarring shift in shot composition used by Eggers to punctuate the

severe implications of William's prideful action to go against the Church. It is the film's inciting incident, and it is depicted in a way that draws the viewer's attention to the film's style. From the outset, Eggers is foregrounding a style-over-scares approach. Unlike the tactic of many contemporary horror films to begin with a death which establishes its monster, *The Witch* begins with a staid, expository sequence. The elevated horror aesthetic is made readily apparent from these first few shots.

Fig. 2.2: The opening scene introduces the family with centered, symmetrical compositions, a pattern which is broken several shots later.

The film continues with the family's exodus from society. An initially harmonious string score becomes increasingly discordant as the family reaches the woods, with the strings producing a feverish crescendo and a choral wailing bubbling to the surface of the soundtrack. In the following scene, slow pans and tracking shots establish the setting of their new home, a ramshackle farmhouse on the edge of the

woods. The camera delicately pushes in on Thomasin as she prays forgiveness for her sins. This prayer ends with a shot featuring a similar camera move, a foreboding push-in on the woods.

These elements of style come into play throughout the film, particularly in key moments of the plot. The game of peek-a-boo during which the baby Samuel is kidnapped by the witch plays out in a long take centered on Thomasin's face. An ominous tracking shot around the corner of the farmhouse reveals an angered William chopping wood next to the woodpile against which he will later perish. A centered push-in shows Mercy and Jonas lying prone in bed play-acting being petrified by the supernatural powers of a witch. Centered framing depicts Thomasin's final decision to sign the book and venture naked into the wood where she joins a coven of witches.

The overall pace of the film is slow, allowing for the tensions between characters to grow in a manner which produces dread. This is done in lieu of set pieces common to the horror genre, which build tension rapidly and release that tension with a jump scare or which culminate in the bloody death of a character. *The Witch* does not release its tension until the final frames, when Thomasin joins the witches communing in the woods and is lifted into the air with a look of jubilation on her face. This pacing produces a much different viewing experience than those of many other contemporary horror films, and it differs from the experience promised by A24's marketing.

These formal elements situate *The Witch* firmly within the template for the elevated horror film. Eggers makes his stylistic choices very apparent, and they are used to convey a deliberately-paced story about predominantly internal, interpersonal conflict.

It is worth noting here how the external conflict presented by the film's eponymous witch plays into the elevated horror narrative. While I argue that elevated horror relies more on the psychological states of its characters than the presence of a prototypical horror monster, most elevated horror films nevertheless present the type of interstitial monstrosity that is defined by Noel Carroll. Chapter 1 addresses how this works in *Under the Skin*. In *The Babadook*, the titular monster is a fairy-tale specter that haunts the film's protagonist, Amelia (Essie Davis), which yields a more allegorical reading in which The Babadook is a manifestation of Amelia's grief, parental anxiety, and depression. The monster in *It Follows* which stalks the teenage characters represents both an external physical threat of death, as well as an internal, existential fear of aging which comes with the transition into adulthood. *The Transfiguration* (d. O'Shea, 2017) tells the story of a teenage boy cursed with vampirism—the interstitial identity of the vampire becomes a reflection of the character's isolation. The horror conceit in *Get Out* of having another's consciousness supplant one's own introduces an interstitial dimension. This process, as it is described in the film, would relegate the mind of the protagonist Chris (Daniel Kaluuya) to the "sunken place," where he would no longer have agency over his actions. The conceit is a metaphor for larger social concerns, what director Peele refers to as a "state of marginalization … [a] dark hole we throw black people in" (Lopez, 2017). *Annihilation* (d. Garland, 2018) presents many depictions of the interstitial, with the film's alien setting combining genetic components of differing species. These genetic couplings present objects merging and splitting apart like cancerous cells, presenting a literalization of the "impulsive self-destruction" of the characters (Sragow, 2019).

As this section has outlined, the titular monster of *The Witch* is not the sole source of the film's horror and tension. Rather, her role functions in tandem with the disintegration of the family unit at the center of the film—which prompts Eggers to call this a "family drama" in the same breath that he calls it a "horror movie" (Bitel, 2016). This differs from other narratives centering on witches in the 17th century, most notably Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1953), which present the hysteria and paranoia surrounding accusations of witchcraft where no actual witches reside.[25] Eggers' film instead presents an actual witch, but he nevertheless tells a story about hysteria, paranoia, and religious persecution in Puritan America. In this sense, Eggers is presenting a historical fiction dimension to the film while still adhering to key archetypes of the horror genre.

This genre hybridity and the extent to which these films function as traditional horror narratives are important aspects of the elevated horror cycle. There is a dimension of novelty in the elevated horror aesthetic, enough so to warrant a cultural discussion over these films' place in the horror canon. The sense that these films are fresh, and that they are revitalizing a genre which had hit a fallow period, is a consistent point made in the discourse about the cycle. It is worth noting that this sense of newness comes about by reconfiguring what is old. We have seen in Chapter 1 how common genre tropes—the age-old threat of the science fiction alien Other and the traditional notion of the monster—are resituated in *Under the Skin* to present a narrative which appears novel. Similar comparisons could be extended to other films in the cycle. *Get Out*, for example,

[25] Miller wrote *The Crucible* as an extended metaphor for similar accusations being made during the era of McCarthyism and the HUAC hearings (see: Miller, 1996).

has a kinship with *The Stepford Wives* (d. Forbes, 1975) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Siegel, 1956; Kaufman, 1978), films in which the horror stems from the fear of losing agency over one's own body. The novelty of *Get Out* comes from how this familiar narrative premise is used to express fears and frustrations from the perspective of the African American community (a perspective historically under-represented in the horror genre). *The Witch* is a rather obvious example, given that it is a story inspired by folklore and written by a filmmaker with a vested interest in the past. Eggers' "genre of the past" idea blends with horror in a manner that feels novel, even though there is a sense of familiarity to the premise of accusations of witchcraft and the "cabin the woods" setting.

A24: "Pushing Horror into New Realms"

Days before the 2016 Academy Awards, it was announced that A24's line of credit, provided by a consortium including Bank of America, J.P. Morgan, and SunTrust, had been raised from $50 million to $125 million (Lieberman, 2016). This was due in no small part to the success of *The Witch* in its opening weekend, as well as the seven Oscar nominations the company netted that season (Lang, 2016b). A24 said it would use the financial cushion to "build upon its core film-distribution business, as well as to expand its film development/production and television businesses" (Lieberman, 2016). The company had ventured into production and financing for the first time the previous summer when it partnered with Plan B to produce *Moonlight* (d. Jenkins, 2016) (Jaafar, 2015), a film that would go on to win the Best Picture Oscar in 2017. The boost in

available funds likely helped finance the robust marketing, distribution, and Oscar campaign for the film. The increased line of credit would also make it easier to release films on 2,000-plus screens. Effectively, these benefits reinforced the company's goals, helping to increase brand awareness through wide theatrical releases and award season contenders.

This development also highlights the importance of elevated horror to A24's business model. The praise and accolades for *The Witch* at Sundance gave A24 the confidence to give the film a risky wide release, and that risk paid off. For all the talk of poor audience response and bad word of mouth, A24 generally fares well with its horror content. *The Witch* was a profitable venture and would be followed by other financial successes in the genre: *Hereditary* (d. Aster, 2018), *Midsommar*, and, to a lesser extent, *It Comes at Night* (d. Shults, 2017). These films typify A24's house style: they are auteur vehicles, made with a steady and apparent sense of style, with ambitious narratives which reach beyond the conventions of their respective genres. All of A24's horror films have fit the definition of elevated horror, and the company has released elevated horror content consistently ever since the success of *The Witch*—putting out at least one elevated horror film per year.[26]

It is not surprising, then, that elevated horror has become synonymous with A24 in the press. Much of the discourse surrounding elevated horror mentions A24 by name

[26] 2020 is the notable exception. *Saint Maud* (d. Glass) was slated for release in spring of 2020, but its release was moved to 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

and states the company's key role in popularizing the trend,[27] and even those which do not address the company's influence on elevated horror still mention the A24 titles that populate the cycle's corpus. There is a general agreement among the press that the company helped give rise to the "elevated" label through how it handled its horror films. A 2018 *BBC* article stated that "if [negative] connotations [attributed to horror] have become less negative lately, it's largely down to two independent companies, Blumhouse … and A24 … both of which champion idea-based rather than gore-based horror" (Barber). *The Guardian* wrote in 2017 that "[i]t is telling that *It Comes at Night*, *The Witch*, and *A Ghost Story* were all put out by A24 Films, a young company that has already found Oscar success … if anyone's pushing horror into new realms, it's [A24]" (Rose). An op-ed in the pop culture blog *The Mary Sue* addressed the elevated horror trend by saying that "[l]ately, more directors, especially through A24, have been pushing the boundaries of horror with slow-burn stories that focus more on thematic terror rather than jump scares" (Gardner, 2019). A24 has been at the forefront of the discourse surrounding elevated horror, with the company becoming something of a poster child for elevated horror due to its continual and consistent contributions to the cycle.

What this discourse about elevated horror illustrates is that, just as elevated horror is important to A24's brand, A24 has been key in the development of the elevated horror cycle. Much of this has to do with marketing and distribution, where A24 taking risks with theatrical distribution shines a bigger spotlight on elevated horror films than most other companies that have released films in the cycle (e.g., IFC Films, Radius-TWC,

[27] For some examples, see: Rose, 2017; Barber, 2018; Gardner, 2019; Crump, 2019; Bradley, 2019.

Amazon Studios). As the company's brand name became more prominent over the latter part of the 2010s, this spotlight only grew brighter.

Jacob Knight, in a pointedly-worded critique of elevated horror and A24's role in it, calls the company's marketing and distribution strategy "the A24 effect," a "sort of terror sophistry" in which the company's advertising misrepresents art-house films to appeal to audiences beyond the film festival crowd (Knight, 2018). As the previous section outlines, the marketing of *The Witch* expanded the audience for these films, eliciting backlash from some viewers but ultimately giving a visibility to the elevated horror cycle that no film prior to *The Witch* was able to achieve. The only antecedent to *The Witch* which could make a claim to expanding the audience for the cycle is *It Follows*. *It Follows* generated the positive critical buzz that could have raised the profile of elevated horror. "Credit critics with lifting this one out of the arthouse and into the mainstream," *Variety* reported (Lang, 2015). Michael Rechtshaffen opened his *Los Angeles Times* review with the rhetorical, "[c]ould we be on the cusp of a new golden age of horror films?" (2015). However, Radius' haste to expand the release of *It Follows* kept the company from fully capitalizing on this positive word of mouth. In its debut in New York and Los Angeles, the film achieved a remarkable $40,000 per screen average across four theaters. This prompted Radius to hold off on the film's planned VOD release in favor of a wider theatrical rollout (McNary, 2015). The company expanded the release, first to 1,218 theaters then to 1,655 the following weekend. This was a substantially wider release than previous films of the elevated horror cycle, *Under the Skin* (176

theaters at its peak), *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (d. Amirpour, 2014) (19 theaters) and *The Babadook* (80 theaters).

As the expansion for *It Follows* was unplanned, it was carried out with "little in-theater advertising and few TV spots" (Mendelson, 2015a). What is more, it was the first time the small distributor was attempting a release of this magnitude (Mendelson, 2015b). As Mendelson speculates—and I am inclined to agree—the release of *It Follows* in a different distributor's hands may have equated to a more substantial hit at a time when horror was struggling at the box office (Mendelson, 2015b). If the film had been given a more structured release with a well-planned marketing campaign, rather than the impromptu one Radius provided, than it may have been a hit on the level of *The Witch* with articles written about how it jump-started the elevated horror phenomenon. Instead, articles were written with titles like, "How 'The Witch' Accidentally Launched a Horror Movement" (Crump, 2019).

Laura Bradley at *Vanity Fair* claims, similarly to Knight, that "clever marketing had its part to play in [the elevated horror trend]. After the generally uninspired horror of the 2000s, horror's image had hit a low point. And Blumhouse and A24 both had a hand in turning that ship around" (2019). Blumhouse's involvement in the elevated horror cycle was with *Get Out*, which the company partnered with Universal to release. That film's marketing campaign did go a long way in promoting a new, innovative figure in horror, Jordan Peele. The film's trailer, which presented the film as from "the mind of Jordan Peele," was viewed online over 60 million times between its October 2016 premiere and the film's March 2017 release (Marich, 2017). The trailer also played in the

multiplex before both horror films and prestige dramas like *Fences* (d. Washington, 2016) (Marich, 2017). It is very unusual for a horror film to advertise before non-horror films, let alone an Oscar contender. This campaign certainly aimed to present the film as straddling the line between horror genre fare and serious prestige picture, inviting audiences that would not normally watch horror to give this more "elevated" genre piece a chance.

The major difference between the *Get Out* marketing campaign and A24's marketing for horror is that *Get Out* benefitted from the resources of a major studio. Blumhouse's first-look deal with Universal allows the small independent studio opportunities to put select films—*The Purge* (d. DeMonaco, 2013), *Unfriended* (d. Gabriadze, 2014), *Get Out* etc.—on a larger stage. Universal's rollout of *Get Out* would be prohibitively costly for an independent to undertake (an estimated $30 million in marketing costs, more than six times the film's production budget) (Fuster, 2017). It is more than Blumhouse would have been willing to spend if released through their own distributing arm, BH Tilt, which provides "semi-wide releases" with "minimal marketing and carefully selected theaters" (Mendelson, 2017). It is similarly unlikely that A24, which relies heavily on lower cost targeted online marketing, would provide its horror films with such a robust marketing budget. Universal's sole foray into the elevated horror cycle proved to be the cycle's biggest success story. *Get Out* grossed over $250 million worldwide and received numerous accolades including four Academy Award nominations and one win (Peele for Best Original Screenplay). In large part, the reasoning behind this success can be traced back to Peele using the horror genre to

produce trenchant commentary on the illusion of a "post-racial" America and, in doing so, tapping into contemporary social concerns in a novel and resonant way. At the same time, one cannot downplay the importance of a major studio's influence in amplifying this elevated horror film to mainstream visibility, especially as it compares to the many independently distributed films in the cycle.

Entire books could be (and certainly will be) written about the cultural impact of *Get Out*. I discuss it here only to emphasize that few films in the elevated horror cycle have achieved any sort of mainstream crossover success. These include, albeit to differing degrees, *It Follows, The Witch, Get Out, Hereditary,* and *Midsommar* (the latter two will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3). The other films maintain niche horror fan appreciation (e.g., *The Babadook, Raw, Tigers are Not Afraid*), art-house appeal (e.g., *Goodnight Mommy, The Killing of a Sacred Deer, The Lighthouse*), or had failed attempts at crossover success (e.g., *Annihilation*, *mother!*, *Gretel & Hansel*).

CONCLUSION

The Witch is a textbook example of elevated horror. Eggers prominently displays the elements of style associated with the elevated horror aesthetic, and his script presents a generically hybrid narrative that showcases both psychological and monstrous horror. The presentation of this aesthetic, paired with the film's successful wide release, makes *The Witch* one of the most visible examples of elevated horror. With *The Witch*, the elevated horror cycle was provided its first substantial hit, and while it is not the first film

in the elevated horror cycle, it could be described as the cycle's prototype. It is one of the first films that commentators point to when discussing elevated horror.

A24's rise to prominence in American independent cinema coincides with the rise in popularity of the elevated horror cycle. I believe this correlation is no coincidence. No company has done more to promote elevated horror and give filmmakers working with that aesthetic a platform to present their work. Blumhouse is rightfully part of the elevated horror conversation, and the success of *Get Out* went a long way in expanding the cultural awareness of what elevated horror is and what it can accomplish. But unlike A24, Blumhouse has not, at the time of this writing, gone on to release more elevated horror films. The elevated horror aesthetic is also not a central element of Blumhouse's house style as it is with A24. As Amanda Ann Klein points out, film cycles are "bound to the whims of contemporary tastes …. Once interest in a particular set of semantic elements wanes, the corresponding film cycle will cease to make money at the box office" (2011, p. 16). Cycles are short-lived commodities that rely on the support of the audience. Few elevated horror films see a wide theatrical release, with distributors instead focusing on achieving cult status for their films via streaming and VOD. In terms of visibility, A24 has been at the forefront of the elevated horror conversation. A24 has been the most consistent distributor of elevated horror in the theatrical space, and the increase in the company's brand recognition over the course of the decade has provided these films an ongoing appeal on streaming services. As such, the horror films of A24 are carrying the mantle for elevated horror, pushing the cycle into the mainstream.

The next chapter examines how this visibility and brand recognition has translated into valuable exposure for filmmakers releasing elevated horror with A24. This necessitates a conversation about authorship, including the extent to which filmmakers like Eggers and Aster are positioned as *auteur* horror directors and whether the corporate authorship of A24's brand supersedes or otherwise complicates this *auteur* label. With the arrival of *The Witch* at Sundance, Eggers was immediately viewed by some critics as a director with remarkable talent and a promising future in filmmaking. Two years after the release of *The Witch,* Aster's work on *Hereditary* was met with an even warmer reception. Chapter 3 takes as its case study *Midsommar,* Aster's follow-up to *Hereditary*, as a means of looking at the progression of his directorial style and how his employment of the elevated horror aesthetic changed from one film to the next.

Chapter 3: *Midsommar*: Genre Hybridity, the Horror Auteur, and the Self-Seriousness of Elevated Horror

Following the company's big win at the 2017 Academy Awards, where its film *Moonlight* (d. Jenkins, 2016) took home Best Picture, A24 was under a brighter spotlight than ever. A24 had been a buzz-worthy entity in the trades since its inception, and its reputation had grown considerably since then. The prevailing discourse around its Best Picture win was that the company was now a major indie player. Publications like *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Guardian*, and *Vanity Fair* made comparisons to Miramax, the most successful (and brand-focused) indie of the 1990s and early-2000s (Weiner, 2017; Desta, 2017; Rose, 2017). *GQ* published an "oral history" of A24, featuring interviews from talent which praised the company for having an approach that favors the artistic ambitions of its filmmakers over the financial bottom line. "Hollywood is run by accountants at this point. And so anytime you speak with someone who's not a pure accountant … [i]t's exciting," director Harmony Korine said, insinuating that A24 was not solely profit-motivated (Baron, 2017). The company was profiled in this way in the press and would continue to be throughout the remainder of the decade, which helped to solidify its brand as an indie distributor releasing cutting edge, auteur-driven material.

At the same time, the divisive discourse around elevated horror was amplifying. The 2017 release of Jordan Peele's *Get Out* by Universal and its subsequent awards season campaign brought about debates over definitions of horror. After the film was classified as a comedy by the Hollywood Foreign Press Association (HFPA), which

placed it in the category of Best Motion Picture – Musical or Comedy at the Golden Globes, Peele pushed back. In making the case that "what [*Get Out*] is about is not funny," Peele also mentioned that while he set out to make a horror film, he ultimately categorized it as a "social thriller" (Kohn, 2017). The conversation thus shifted from commentators championing the rare horror film that breaks into the prestigious awards season circle to debates about what does and does not constitute a horror film. "It was supposed to be the year horror finally got some respect," wrote Jason Zinoman in *The New York Times*, contending that the "long history of movies being too good to be considered horror" does a disservice to the genre (2018). This sentiment would be reiterated in numerous pieces bemoaning the concept of elevated horror, with critics claiming that "elevating" some horror properties necessarily relegated others to a lower status (e.g., Knight, 2018; Ehrlich, 2019). Arguments like these, alongside the box office failures of the big studio elevated horror films *mother!* (d. Aronofsky, Paramount, 2017) and *Annihilation* (d. Garland, Paramount, 2018), perpetuated a negative discourse over elevated horror that would continue through the end of the decade. It was a discourse that stuck to Ari Aster's feature debut *Hereditary* (2018), which became a flash point in the conversation over what constitutes a horror film and whether elevated horror unnecessarily complicates such distinctions (Knight, 2018).

Aster's career provides an illuminating case study in the conversation of the elevated horror cycle. Following the critical and commercial success of *Hereditary*, the director was dubbed the "poster child" for elevated horror by *The AV Club* (Dowd & Rife, 2020), and his 2019 film *Midsommar* presents a notable inflection point in the

development of the cycle. *Midsommar* was seen as an ambitious passion project, and it contains a level of genre hybridity unlike previous films of the cycle. This chapter addresses the ways in which this genre hybridity was and was not considered within the popular press discourse surrounding Aster upon the film's release. It also examines how the film's use of humor and its self-aware use of slasher tropes present a potential evolution of the elevated horror cycle. The cycle has been criticized for being snobbish and overly self-serious (Ehrlich, 2019), and I argue that *Midsommar* displays the characteristics of elevated horror while also acting as a departure from the cycle's perceived self-seriousness.

Continuing the conversation initiated in earlier chapters about A24 and its relationship to the cycle, the case study of Aster's work also looks at how *auteurism* factors into A24's business strategy and how marketing *Midsommar* around the perception of Aster as an auteur influenced the discourse. I argue that A24 worked to perpetuate the discussion of Aster as a horror auteur by presenting the film to critics and audiences as a singular and unique "vision." Using Robert Eggers' *The Lighthouse* (2019) as a point of comparison, I will assess A24's impact on the elevated horror cycle through the manufacturing of auteur discourses and the company's marketing and distribution practices. Ultimately, the differences in the release strategies for *Midsommar* and *The Lighthouse* show how profit motives and marketability allow some A24 horror films more mainstream exposure than others.

ARI ASTER: HORROR'S "GOD OF MISCHIEF"

Ari Aster's filmmaking has always been provocative. His American Film Institute thesis film, *The Strange Thing About the Johnsons*, became an internet curiosity in 2011 when it circulated on Facebook in posts with the caption, "Have you heard about the Johnsons?" and a link to the video titled, "*The Strange Thing About the Johnsons* – Don't Ask, Just Watch!" (Harris, 2011). The short film engendered controversy due to its taboo subject matter (sexual abuse, incest) and its depiction of a dysfunctional African American family from the perspective of a white director (Harris, 2011). It also taps into the discomforting tonality of human horrors, which Aster captures with both a roving mobile camera and picturesque still shots (a style he would later employ in his feature films). This short is often used as a point of comparison to Aster's first feature-length film *Hereditary*, given that both films have narratives which engage with disturbing secrets within a family. *The Strange Thing About the Johnsons* is about an abusive relationship between a father and son. In *Hereditary*, a woman named Annie (Toni Collette) uncovers that her deceased mother had affiliations with an occult group who attempt to use Annie's children, Charlie (Milly Shapiro) and Peter (Alex Wolff), as vessels for the demon "god of mischief" Paimon. Both films produce horror by exploring the effects of trauma on a family.

The director's third short film, *Munchausen* (2013), also depicts familial drama through a horror lens, but it does so with a tinge of irony. It initially plays out as a parody of a coming-of-age narrative. In a montage underscored with a triumphant score, the film begins by telling the story of a young man going off to college and meeting the love of

his life. This provides a layer of sentimentality akin to the emotional arcs of Pixar films (e.g., the final scene of *Toy Story 3* or the prologue of *Up*), which establishes a comedic premise. This premise is then undercut by the horror premise of a mother poisoning her son to prevent him from moving out of her home.

This sense of comedic irony is another element that recurs in Aster's films. Between the release of these shorts, Aster made a comedy sketch for the website Funny or Die, entitled "TDF Really Works." It is a faux advertisement whose combination of low production value, cringe comedy, and crude depictions of visceral bodily harm blur the line between body horror and juvenile comedy. His 2011 short *Beau* also mixes horror with comedy by juxtaposing the protagonist's (Billy Mayo) tense anxiety and agoraphobia with the blunt, aggressive outbursts levelled at him by others. *C'est La Vie*, made in 2016, consists of a bleak monologue which confronts the harsh realities of Los Angeles homelessness, but it is edited to present gallows punchlines, such as a hard transition where the homeless narrator is hitchhiking, then seen after the cut burying the driver's body in a roadside ditch. This blend of horror and comedy, as I will illustrate later in this chapter, is a central talking point in the discourse of *Midsommar*.

According to one source, A24 "discovered" Aster through the controversy and provocation of *The Strange Thing About the Johnsons* and *Munchausen* (Lattanzio, 2020). In truth, Aster was beginning to gain notoriety with his short films, both online and on the festival circuit (Bishop, 2018; Kohn, 2018), well before A24 entered the picture. A24 came on board *Hereditary* after the scripting phase. The script tells a story of demonic possession from the vantage point of Annie and her son Peter. Following the

untimely death of Annie's daughter, Charlie, Annie is convinced by a member of her grief support group (Ann Dowd) to conduct a séance to communicate with Charlie's spirit. Unbeknownst to Annie, the support group is populated with members of an occult sect formerly run by her late mother, and the séance connects Annie not with Charlie but with a demon named Paimon. This demon possesses Annie and, in seeking a male human host, attacks Peter. The demon kills Annie and possesses Peter, and the film ends with Peter entering the family's treehouse, where the occultists are worshipping at an alter dedicated to Paimon.

A24 ushered the finished film through its usual distribution scheme—a premiere at Sundance and showings at other select festivals (in this case, SXSW and the horror-themed Overlook Film Festival), followed by a wide theatrical rollout. The festival screenings served their intended purpose, drumming up positive word of mouth and sufficient buzz over the work of Aster and the film's star Toni Collette (for whom critics were attempting to plant seeds for a future Oscar nomination, an outcome that would ultimately not come to pass). The rapturous praise for Aster's direction, as well as comparisons being made between his first feature and horror classics, jumpstarted a conversation about Aster's prospects as a "horror auteur."

"*Hereditary* takes its place as a new generation's *The Exorcist*," wrote critic Joshua Rothkopf after screening *Hereditary* at 2018's Sundance Film Festival. "[F]or some, it will spin heads even more savagely" (Rothkopf, 2018). Thus began the lofty expectations for Aster's film, which would debut domestically that June in an expansive 2,964 theaters. Critics cobbled massive shoes for *Hereditary* to fill, foregrounding it as

that year's greatest horror discovery and placing its impact alongside those of canonical horror texts such as *The Exorcist, The Shining* and *Psycho*.[28] A24 exacerbated these expectations even further in the film's theatrical trailer, quoting Rothkopf's *The Exorcist* comparison alongside another call for the immediate canonization of the film from *USA Today*, which heralded the film as "a modern-day horror masterpiece" (A24, 2018a). An online promo from A24, aptly titled "Hype," similarly stoked the flames of anticipation with quotes from *Rolling Stone* ("Get ready for a new horror classic") and *The AV Club* ("Believe the hype") (A24, 2018b), the latter piece of praise stylized with "hype" in bold capital letters encircled by the names of high circulation publications which had given the film positive reviews (e.g., *The New York Times, TIME, Entertainment Weekly*) (Fig. 3.1).

[28] Mark Kermode, in his June review of the film, criticized his critic colleagues for making such comparisons, which he claimed did the "frightening yet ultimately frustrating chiller few favours" (2018).

Fig. 3.1: A24's marketing for *Hereditary* assured audiences that the massive hype for the film created by critics was warranted.

Hereditary was a sizeable hit for A24. It became, at the time, the company's highest-grossing film worldwide (at $81 million) and its second highest-grossing film domestically (at $44 million—$5 million less domestically than top earner *Lady Bird* [d. Gerwig, 2017]). The film received some negative publicity stemming from disappointed mainstream audiences—notably a D+ CinemaScore that was reported in the trades and on film blogs. Aster later commented on his lack of concern for disappointing audiences, stating that, "[If] people walk out and they're like, 'That wasn't scary. That was boring,' [then] God bless them …. Maybe it will stick with them for another day or two" (Sharf, 2019). In saying this, Aster acknowledged that the film did not play to a mainstream audience like other blockbuster horror. As I outlined in previous chapters, the publicity

over low CinemaScore ratings and negative audience reviews online is par for the course with the elevated horror cycle. The predominant reason for this is exactly what Aster acknowledges: that audiences expecting to see a mainstream horror movie with traditional scare tactics are often let down by what elevated horror provides.

Despite the negative reaction from audiences, *Hereditary* is one of A24's biggest successes, and it affirms multiple points of the company's strategy. For one, the film is another example of A24's ambitious distribution strategy panning out in the company's favor. The theatrical release of *Hereditary*, at its widest, reached nearly 3,000 theaters nationwide.[29] This competitive release during the summer movie season, along with the "hype" surrounding that release, positioned Aster at the forefront of the horror cinema conversation. Critics called his filmmaking "gifted" (Dowd, 2018; Rothkopf, 2018) and "accomplished" (Sims, 2018), particularly for a first-time feature director. Even some reviews that were less laudatory, like that of Mark Kermode, recognized Aster's talent behind the camera (Kermode, 2018). A24 started as a company wishing to work with auteur talent of the 1990s and 2000s (e.g., Sally Potter, Sophia Coppola, Harmony Korine) as a means of establishing its indie brand; now it was striving to promote young filmmakers with budding talent (e.g., Aster, Greta Gerwig, Trey Edward Shults, Robert Eggers, the Safdie brothers) and to establish them as a new generation of auteurs. *Hereditary* proved to be a launching point for the conversation of Aster as a horror auteur, and *Midsommar* cemented this label.

[29] For comparison, the release size for major studio horror films of that year ranged from 3,038 theaters (Universal's *The First Purge* [d. McMurray]) to 3,990 theaters (Universal's *Halloween* [d. Green]).

Midsommar was released on Independence Day weekend 2019 in 2,707 theaters nationwide. Unlike many of its elevated horror (and A24) contemporaries, the film did not screen at any film festivals prior to release. Instead of launching on the festival circuit, A24 leaned on its own brand name and the reputation that had formed around Aster following the success of *Hereditary*. *Midsommar* follows Dani (Florence Pugh), a graduate student agonized by the recent deaths of her parents and sister. Following this tragedy, Dani's boyfriend of four years, Christian (Jack Reynor), who was on the verge of ending their relationship, instead feels begrudgingly obligated to invite her to a summer vacation in Sweden that he had been planning with his friends Mark (Will Poulter), Josh (William Jackson Harper), and Pelle (Vilhelm Blomgren). In Sweden, the travelers stay at Pelle's hometown of Hårga, a small, isolated village surrounded by woods. Here they witness a series of pagan rituals which disturb them and endanger their lives. In conventional slasher fashion, the travelers are killed off one-by-one, and Dani becomes accepted into the Hårgan community following a ceremony that crowns her as the "May Queen." Having witnessed Christian having sex with a Hårgan woman, Dani chooses Christian to be immolated in a cleansing ritual, and the film ends with Dani smiling as she watches the fire burn.

Midsommar opened at number six at the U.S. box office, earning $6.5 million on its way to a $27 million domestic total ($46 million worldwide). It trailed Warner Bros.' *Annabelle Comes Home* (d. Gary Dauberman), the third entry in the *Annabelle* franchise that itself is part of the larger "*Conjuring* universe" of blockbuster horror films. That film, which would go on to gross $74 million domestic, received a significantly more

tepid critical response than *Midsommar*. By some online metrics, audiences favored *Midsommar*, as well (IMDb user scores for *Midsommar* average 7.1 out of 10, and for *Annabelle Comes Home* they average 5.9 out of 10).[30] The two films' CinemaScore ratings were also similar (*Midsommar*: C+; *Annabelle Comes Home*: B-).

Looking at CinemaScore alone, *Midsommar* fared better with opening weekend audiences than *Hereditary*, yet *Midsommar* did not replicate its predecessor's box office. The C+ CinemaScore still underscores the divisiveness that comes with elevated horror, but it is also a higher score than most films in the cycle. And the 7.1 IMDb user score is slightly higher than other central elevated horror texts *The Babadook* (6.8), *It Follows* (6.8), and *The Witch* (6.9). These numbers illustrate that something about *Midsommar* made it more accessible to general audiences than previous elevated horror. I argue that the genre hybridity of the film differs from other elevated horror films, in that it employs humor. Aster's playful use of horror conventions could explain these higher user scores.

GENRE EXPERIMENTATION AND HUMOR IN *MIDSOMMAR*

Despite the overblown critical praise calling *Hereditary* the next great horror film, a counterargument surfaced online upon the film's release that it was not a horror movie at all – that it was not overtly scary enough to be placed within the genre. This social media backlash likely stemmed from the same audiences who contributed to the film's low CinemaScore. One piece of evidence in this argument was Aster himself, who was quoted in an interview with ScreenCrush saying that he avoided using the phrase "horror

[30] Online user scores last accessed May 5, 2021.

film" in pitch meetings or around crew members on set (Hayes, 2018). Aster did not mean to say that he believed *Hereditary* to not be a horror film. He claimed that he was being misquoted by those citing the interview, saying that he could not understand how someone could see *Hereditary* and not identify it as a horror film (Aster & Eggers, 2019).

This distancing of *Hereditary* from a traditional "horror" label does bring up a fruitful question regarding certain directors (i.e., Aster and Eggers) and their relationships to elevated horror. To what extent do these directors' films engage with the horror genre versus other genres? Previous chapters of this project have considered how genre hybridity functions in the elevated horror cycle—many films in the cycle combine the elevated horror aesthetic with traditional elements of the horror genre, and they have narratives which borrow from other genres such as science fiction, domestic drama, and psychological thriller. However, as I will argue here, the films Aster and Eggers released in 2019 complicate this hybridity, blurring the lines of genre categorization. Aster has called *Midsommar*, albeit hesitantly, "horror-adjacent," describing it as a "perverse wish fulfillment fantasy that is ultimately a fairy tale" for its protagonist, Dani, and a "folk horror" film for the other characters who visit the Swedish village of Hårga (Aster & Eggers, 2019). Eggers, similarly, views his 2016 film *The Witch* as a clear horror movie which uses tropes of the genre and his 2019 film *The Lighthouse* as more akin to the literary subgenre of "weird fiction" popularized by H.P. Lovecraft (Aster & Eggers, 2019). Weird fiction, with its expressions of the macabre, has roots in the horror genre, but it often also has ties to the fantasy genre.

Both *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* engage in a level of genre hybridity. *Hereditary*, in particular, sees Aster leaning into the "art-house" connotations of the elevated horror cycle. The film is a domestic drama with a supernatural angle, combining a narrative about grief with one about demonic possession. Collette has described it as "*The Ice Storm* as a horror film" (Fear, 2018). Aster cited Mike Leigh and Ingmar Bergman as central influences on *Hereditary*, and he encouraged the film's cast to watch Leigh's *All or Nothing* (2002) and Bergman's *Cries and Whispers* (1972) to prepare for their roles (Kohn, 2018). As with *Cries and Whispers*, *Hereditary* depicts with plenty of stillness the weight of existential dread brought on by the death of a central character.

All the same, it is not a stretch to say that *Hereditary* has more mainstream aspirations than the filmographies of Leigh or Bergman. For one, the film utilizes stylistic conventions common to mainstream horror. This is evident in the use of a lingering camera pointed toward dark corners to induce uncertainty over what might be hiding in the shadows, as well as the deployment of sound design to startle the audience with phantom tongue clicks. The narrative also adheres to certain recognizable conventions of the horror genre, with tropes like a Biblical evil, possession, séances, and the cursed object filling out the story of this family and its relationship to radical evil in the form of a demon.

Beyond the use of these conventions, however, *Hereditary* does present itself as an elevated horror film. Aster and his cinematographer Pawel Pogorzelski augment most shots with measured, deliberate movement that makes the camera appear like a roving observer. Pivotal moments in the plot are depicted with characters and objects centered

within the frame, such as the reaction shot of Peter immediately following the car accident that kills his sister Charlie, the image of Charlie's funeral, and shots of the family performing a séance in the dead of night (Fig. 3.2). The score, which is initially used sparingly, reaches in intense moments a buzzy, atonal frequency that produces a disquieting mood. And the narrative relies heavily on family dynamics and the psychological dimensions of its grieving characters, particularly Annie and Peter, throughout the first two acts. The more external, monstrous threat of possession becomes more pronounced during the film's faster-paced climax. Still, this climax is linked directly to Aster's thematic concerns involving what one inherits from their family and the unsettling reality that such inheritances are out of one's control.

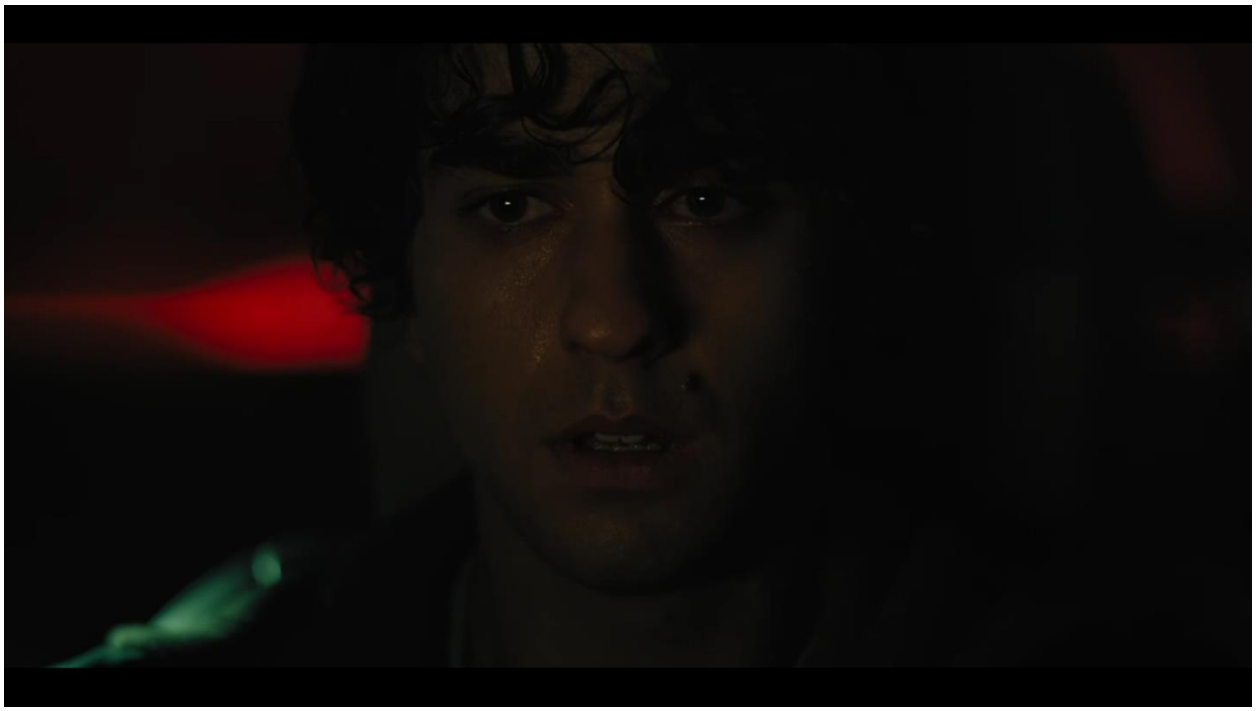

Fig. 3.2: Aster and Pogorzelski use centered framing in *Hereditary* during key moments of the plot.

Fig. 3.2, cont.

Midsommar, too, contains stylistic techniques common to the elevated horror film. Scenes early in the film which introduce the two lead characters, Dani and her boyfriend Christian, center the characters in frame. These scenes are part of a prologue which establishes the two characters' failing relationship and a traumatic experience for Dani—the deaths of her sister and parents—which will inform her character's actions and motivations for the remainder of the film. This prologue concludes with a shot of Dani sobbing on a couch and Christian holding her, a symmetrical shot that centers the two of them accompanied by a long, slow camera move which pushes in on them before moving out of the window behind them into the snowy night—a camera move which transitions the scene into the opening credits (Fig. 3.3). From this prologue alone, the cinematography (centered compositions, deliberate camera movement) and narrative (a horror film rooted in the psychological state of its protagonist) are conveying the characteristics of elevated horror. And these elements of style will continue throughout the film. In particular, symmetrical and centered compositions are used in abundance once the characters reach the remote village of Hårga (Fig. 3.4).

Fig. 3.3: Symmetrical framing and deliberate camera movement are prominently featured in the prologue to *Midsommar*.

Fig. 3.4: Examples of camerawork demonstrative of elevated horror in *Midsommar*.

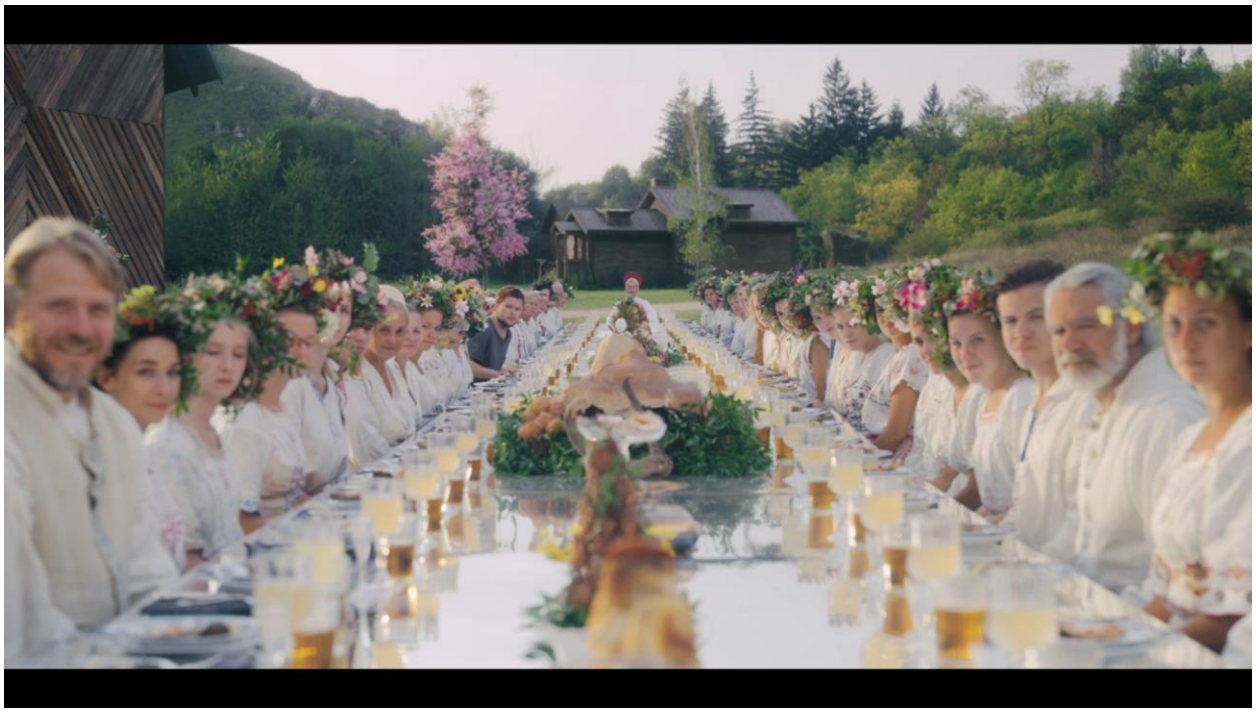

Fig. 3.4, cont.

The film does use more conventional devices of the horror genre. First, the "folk horror" aspect of the film works in a somewhat traditional slasher movie fashion, with characters being killed off one-by-one over the course of the film. The main difference is that most of these deaths do not occur on-screen, which preserves the restraint toward violence characteristic of elevated horror while still playing into the slasher trope of a group of young victims being slowly picked off. Second, the narrative conceit of the film involves what Carol Clover refers to as the "city/country axis." Clover proposes that an "enormous proportion of horror takes as its starting point the visit or move of (sub)urban people to the country," where "people from the city" are endangered by a "threatening rural Other" (1992/2015, p. 124). In *Midsommar*, four characters from Brooklyn (as well as two minor characters from London) travel to a remote area in Sweden's countryside where they find themselves disturbed and ultimately mortally harmed by the rural community's customs. Urban characters are presented with the horrors of an exoticized country locale.

Nevertheless, Aster inverts the "city/country" concept. Clover's notion of the city/country axis presents a juxtaposition of the hegemonic upwardly mobile, civilized, and clean-cut city lifestyle to the unkempt, uncivilized, impoverished, and predominantly male country lifestyle (1992/2015, pp. 124-126). Aster's Hårga, on the other hand, is a depiction of country living that is apparently hygienic, ruled by a strict religious code, and predominantly female. Dani's character arc, too, complicates the dichotomy of city protagonists and country antagonists which undergirds the city/country convention. At the end of the film, Dani makes the choice for Christian to be killed in a sacrificial fire, a

choice which effectively severs her last connection to the urban American society which has caused her immense grief and trauma.[31] Aster also undercuts the slasher movie framework through the pointed lack of darkness. The majority of the film occurs in broad daylight, presenting an ironic subversion of the "things that go bump in the night" tradition of horror.

Midsommar also has a morbid sense of humor which complicates its relationship to elevated horror. *Hereditary* displays this sense of humor as well, albeit to a far lesser extent. That film's tonally clashing end credits song, Joni Mitchell's "Both Sides Now," contains lyrics which could be construed as Aster making light of the film's conclusion in which Peter finds himself in the doomed position of being the vessel for the demon Paimon ("So many things I would have done / but clouds got in my way") and posing an ironic reference to the film's possessed characters ("But now old friends they're acting strange / and they shake their heads, they say I've changed"). For as dismal as *Midsommar* is at the outset, both visually with its washed-out gray palette and narratively with its bleak and unsettling depictions of mental illness and death, the film also contains shifts in tone which produce distinct moments of comedy. Mark, for instance, is presented as an unseemly comic relief character who puts himself into situations of culture clash faux pas (e.g., a scene in which he urinates on Hårga's ancestral tree). There is also a sense of deadpan humor to the subplot involving Christian stealing fellow graduate student Josh's thesis idea.

[31] It is worth noting, too, how the shifting relationship Dani has between the "city" and the "country" is established from the beginning of the film through the motif of medicinal substances. Dani's prescription of Ativan and her use of sleeping pills are contrasted with her use of Harga's herbal hallucinogens, with the former producing no recognizable benefits and the latter producing progressively more euphoric effects.

Many reviews of *Midsommar* remarked on this humor, giving a different tenor to the critical reception of the film compared to other elevated horror. Where the critics' responses to previous elevated horror often dwelled on the films' weighty themes, some critics called *Midsommar* "a delicious prank of a film" which is "barely serious … except when it absolutely means business" (Robey, 2019), an "outrageous black-comic carnival of agony" (Bradshaw, 2019), a "folksy slasher film with a wry sense of humor" (Sims, 2019a), and a film in which Aster is, colloquially speaking, "taking the piss" (Hans, 2019). This discourse shaped the cultural perception of Aster's goals in *Midsommar,* and it arguably called into question the film's placement as part of the elevated horror trend. Infusing humor into horror is clearly not a novel concept in contemporary media—satire, parody, the comic relief character archetype, and an entire subgenre of horror comedy had existed within horror long before the elevated horror cycle began. But humor was not common of elevated horror prior to *Midsommar*. As David Church claims, elevated horror distances the viewer from horror conventions (where the possibility for meta-humor or self-parody arises) by intersecting with "more 'respectable' genres that are not necessarily associated with a humorously fun time" (2021, p. 38). Humor being identified as a prevailing tone in *Midsommar,* as well as Aster's self-reflexive subversion of horror tropes, broadens the genre categorization of the film in a way that differs from the genre hybridity of this project's previous case studies.

To make this point more clearly, we might pose the question: how does the genre hybridity in *Midsommar* differ from that of prior films in the cycle? Previous films discussed in this project have engaged with genres other than horror, but these other

genre signifiers complement the characteristics of elevated horror present within those films. *Under the Skin* engages with science fiction elements, but it does so in order to establish psychological complexities in its protagonist which are common in elevated horror. The period piece family drama of *The Witch* produces internal conflict which works in tandem with the supernatural horror elements to produce an elevated horror narrative. In the case of *Hereditary*, the humor in the end credits song is extra-diegetic. The narrative of the film itself carries a much graver tone, combining the tensions of a domestic drama with the horrors of a possession film.

As Aster himself described it, the multiple genres at work in *Midsommar* do not coalesce into one unified horror story, but rather they stand apart as discrete narrative entities (Aster & Eggers, 2019). The characters of Christian, Mark, and Josh are in a folk horror slasher. Dani is in a "wish fulfillment fantasy" and a fairy tale. The humor is at odds with the distressed psychological states associated with the elevated horror film, yet *Midsommar* deals with both. The film's story has a dark tone as it relates to Dani and her trauma, and this is a narrative familiar to the elevated horror corpus. However, the aspects of the narrative which play into the folk horror subgenre rely on the self-reflexive, humorous tone which many critics were drawn to. *Midsommar* does not read explicitly as a comedy, but comic elements are used in a way unique to elevated horror, which raises questions about how this film is interacting with the cycle.

Amanda Ann Klein, in her book *American Film Cycles*, grapples with the effects of generic parody on the genre cycle. In her account, many critics view the emergence of genre parody—as in *Scary Movie* (d. Wayans, 2000) lampooning the slasher cycle or

Don't Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking Your Juice in the Hood (d. Barclay, 1996) lampooning the "1990s ghetto action cycle"—as a signal that a genre cycle has become saturated to the point where it "is no longer able to satisfy the needs of its audience" (Klein, 2011, p. 176). Klein, meanwhile, expresses the possibility that the existence of parody facilitates "the perpetuation of a film genre or film cycle in a revised form … [weeding out] cliched conventions 'in order to allow for the canon's continued healthy growth'" (2011, p. 176). While *Midsommar* is not a parody of elevated horror in a traditional sense, Aster exercises within the film a self-awareness of both the traditional slasher and the elevated horror cycle that could be functioning in a way similar to what Klein suggests. The director said as much during press interviews for the film, claiming to be consciously "having fun with cliches and tropes" of both the horror genre and the "breakup movie" (Sims, 2019b). In terms of making comedy out of the horror genre, he added that "there's a certain sort of joy to be had in making [a horror film] where [the audience] knows where you're going [with the plot]" (Sims, 2019b). This points to Aster's acknowledgment of an audience awareness of both slasher and elevated horror conventions, an awareness that he is consciously tapping into when he blends humor and horror in *Midsommar.*

Midsommar pushing generic horror tropes to the point that the audience is aware of how the plot will unfold situates the film similarly to the parodies that Klein describes. By juxtaposing the emotionally dense psychological narrative of elevated horror with self-aware humor, Aster is implicitly addressing the self-seriousness of the elevated horror cycle. As the discourse critical to elevated horror amplified between 2017 and

2019, a perception arose that elevated horror took itself too seriously for its own good. Three months prior to the release of *Midsommar*, film critics debated the "evils of 'elevated horror'" on the industry news site *IndieWire*. Several of these critics claimed that the art-house seriousness of the term "elevated horror" assumed imagined and detrimental distinctions of taste within the horror genre (Ehrlich, 2019). Aster was in a sense extending an olive branch to those critics by releasing a film with the aesthetic of an elevated horror film but without the art-house pretentions of "elevating" the genre.

Another elevated horror film released in 2019, *The Lighthouse*, makes a similar case for a departure from or evolution of the cycle. The film, which was Oscar-nominated for Jarin Blaschke's cinematography, certainly looks like an elevated horror film. Shot on 35mm black-and-white film with vintage lenses and custom filters reportedly meant to emulate early-1900s orthochromatic stock (Thomson, 2020), the look of the film mirrors Eggers' pursuit of time-period verisimilitude (the film is set in the 1890s). The 1.19:1 aspect ratio narrows the frame, making centered compositions more visually distinctive. And the narrative concerns the psychological deterioration of two characters while employed in isolation as lighthouse keepers. The depiction of this deterioration relies as much on humor as it does on horror. As critic A.A. Dowd put it, the film "is more satisfying when viewed through the prism of its pitch-black humor; it's fine as a thriller, borderline brilliant as a comedy of cabin fever and competitive machismo" (2019). Again, this is an instance of a film working within the stylistic confines of elevated horror but doing so in a way that challenges elevated horror's prevailing grim tone and self-seriousness.

MANUFACTURING AND SELLING THE HORROR AUTEUR

It is worth addressing how the discourses surrounding Aster's work have afforded the director the opportunity to make a film like *Midsommar*, which experimented with genre and stretched the boundaries for elevated horror. They are discourses manufactured by both A24 and the press and which were bolstered by the financial success of *Hereditary*. A number of critics writing on *Midsommar* commented that it was an "ambitious" and "audacious" film from Aster.[32] This audacity, whether critics found it appealing or overly excessive, certainly perpetuated the idea that Aster was an auteur director. With both *Hereditary* and *Midsommar*, the critical reception often focused on Aster's skill as a filmmaker and his ability to control tone. This perception was fueled by A24, whose press kit for *Midsommar* sold the film to critics as a "dread-soaked cinematic fairy tale" from the "visionary mind" of Aster (A24, 2019d, p. 4). The press notes marketed the film to critics through the frame of auteurism, describing Aster as an artist who "concocts" the sinister story and "imagine[s] a [deep] mythology" in the film's visuals and language (A24, 2019d, pp. 8, 11). This was done within sentences that also briefly noted key collaborators on the film, DP Pawel Pogorzelski and production designer Henrik Svensson, but much of the creative agency was placed on Aster. The brief mention of other people working on the film provided A24 the ability to acknowledge the multiplicity of creative actors that exist within any given film project while nevertheless championing Aster as one of the company's star auteurs.

[32] For some examples, see Bahr, 2019; Edelstein, 2019; Lawson, 2019; Kohn, 2019.

The ways in which these discourses of auteurism were and were not qualified through considerations paid to the collaborative nature of the form show a similar favoring of the writer-director auteur. Many critics reviewing Aster's two feature films mentioned the cinematography of Pogorzelski. In the case of *Hereditary*, some also praised the music of Colin Stetson and the production design of Grace Yun (Bradshaw, 2018; Dowd, 2018; Wolfe, 2018), and many mentioned the score of *Midsommar* composed by Bobby Krlic. The lead actors of *Hereditary* and *Midsommar*, Toni Collette and Florence Pugh, respectively, were also given a lot of credit for their work. There is an argument to be made for these actors giving shape to the films through their performances, giving them some degree of authorship in the final product. The same could be said for Stetson and Krlic, whose scores do some heavy lifting in terms of establishing tone. However, despite critics paying lip service to these key collaborators, the most prominent theme from the critical discourse surrounding these two films was that Aster was a "visionary" and "gifted" young filmmaker delivering on the promise of his high-profile short films. The ambitiousness of the projects was credited to him alone, tipping the scales in the critical discourse around the films' authorship to favor the writer-director as an auteur (as is oftentimes the case in Hollywood).

A24's stake in shaping this discourse is telling. In framing *Midsommar* for the press, the company not only positioned Aster as an auteur talent, but it also highlighted *Hereditary* as "acclaimed by critics … the biggest ever opening for A24, as well as A24's highest-grossing film worldwide" (A24, 2019d, p. 24). The company centered Aster's credibility on profits and accolades, presenting *Hereditary* as a bona fide hit proving the

director's worthiness as a creator. As with many films from established directors, the company foregrounded this bona fide in the marketing for *Midsommar*, with the films' theatrical and online trailers opening with title cards reading "From Ari Aster … director of *Hereditary*" (A24, 2019a; A24, 2019b). These marketing and press materials presented *Hereditary* as something of a calling-card film—a previous success which establishes a degree of trust and familiarity between the director and the audience. In doing this, A24 created a discursive space where Aster's experimentation with *Midsommar* was not only permissible but actively encouraged. With this framing of the director as a "horror auteur," Aster was given the latitude for experimentation and "audacious" filmmaking, as experimenting with the traditions of Hollywood in order to carve out a distinctive and personal style of one's own is a prominent feature of auteurism. This, coupled with the imagery A24 used to market the film, put A24 in a position where it could sell *Midsommar* as a potential summer blockbuster. In turn, *Midsommar* was given a chance to shape the conversation of the elevated horror cycle—more so than Eggers' *The Lighthouse*, whose release was not as wide nor as heavily promoted.

A24's distribution strategy for *Midsommar* is worth examining here in more depth. More precisely, the discrepancy between how the company released *Midsommar* and how it released *The Lighthouse* shines some light on which ambitious "horror auteur" passion projects the company deem as marketable to mainstream audiences. *Midsommar* was given a wide release in the heart of the summer season. The July release date fit thematically with the film's setting of a Swedish village bathed in near-constant summer sunlight. It also showed A24's confidence that Aster's film would be effective

counterprogramming to tentpole blockbusters like *Spider-Man: Far from Home* (d. Watts), *Aladdin* (d. Ritchie), and *Toy Story 4* (d. Cooley), as well as sizable competition to the horror franchise sequel *Annabelle Comes Home* and the horror franchise reboot *Child's Play* (d. Klevberg). Clearly, the company was targeting the multiplex crowd with the 2,707-theater release during the busiest month in the theatrical release calendar.[33][34] *The Lighthouse* involved a comparatively more conservative release. After a limited opening on October 18 in eight theaters, the film expanded to 586 theaters the following weekend. It would expand again the next weekend to 978 before being pulled from theaters slowly over the course of November. This domestic release was substantially smaller than that of *Midsommar* during a less fertile period in the release calendar. *The Lighthouse* proved mildly profitable—it grossed $18 million on a $4 million production budget—but it was not treated by A24 as the horror blockbuster that *Midsommar* was.

This discrepancy could come down to a number of factors. *Midsommar*, for one, deals in traditional slasher tropes which would read familiar to a mainstream audience and which were marketed in A24's trailer alongside distinctive, eye-catching imagery of the film's rural setting of Hårga. The marketing downplayed Aster's playful take on these tropes, instead presenting the film's small village community as an ominous and present threat to the travelers. The images of Dani running through the woods, of her reacting in fear to a face she sees in a mirror, of her gasping in horror at an off-screen threat, and of

[33] Only recently has December grown to compete with July as the most profitable month of the calendar in terms of theatrical grosses, with December releases like *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (d. Abrams, 2015) and *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (d. Johnson, 2017) propelling December grosses high enough to eclipse July's grosses for those years.

[34] A24 would later target their niche fanbase more directly with an August 2019 re-release of *Midsommar* which included footage cut from the original theatrical version.

Josh's limp body falling to the ground—all of these sell the film as an earnest slasher (Fig. 3.5).

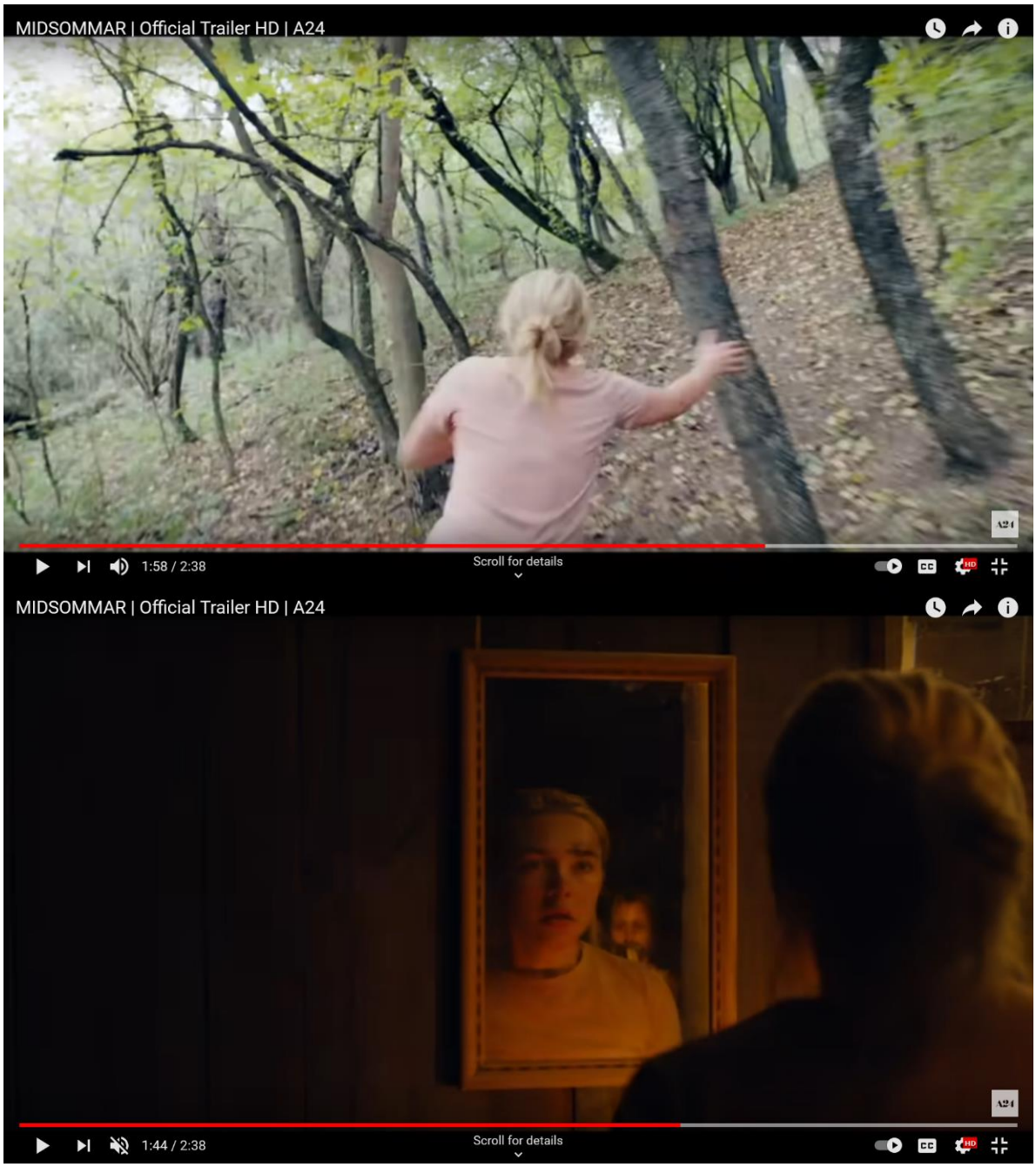

Fig. 3.5: Images from A24's trailer for *Midsommar* which sell the film as a slasher.


MIDSOMMAR | Official Trailer HD | A24
2:11 / 2:38
Scroll for details
MIDSOMMAR | Official Trailer HD | A24
Exit full screen (f)
2:11 / 2:38
Scroll for details

Fig. 3.5, cont.

The Lighthouse, on the other hand, has a less marketable narrative and aesthetic. The black-and-white, 1.19:1 presentation looks more akin to an art-house offering than a genre blockbuster. And while the trailer displays some of the "weird fiction" imagery that may appeal to a genre crowd (the brief image of Robert Pattinson's character punching Willem Dafoe's while a sea creature's tentacle wraps around his neck is the most overtly "genre" image in the trailer), there is little about it which would sell to a wide audience. Pattinson's star persona may have been a selling point to the mainstream, but by 2019 Pattinson had fully divorced his star image from his teen blockbuster roles in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (d. Newell, 2005) and the *Twilight* franchise (2008-2012) through taking leading roles in small indies like *Cosmopolis* (d. Cronenberg, 2012), *The Rover* (d. Michod, 2014), and *Good Time* (d. Safdie and Safdie, 2017). Additionally, *The Lighthouse* trailer foregrounded its director just as *Midsommar*'s did, calling Eggers the "acclaimed director of *The Witch*" (A24, 2019c).[35] However, the recency of *Hereditary*, which had been released one year before *Midsommar*, as well as its superior box office performance to that of *The Witch* made it more likely that mainstream audiences would recall Aster's prior work over Egger's.

The differing distribution and marketing strategies for the two films illustrate that while A24 aspires to maintain its brand identity as the studio merging the art-house with the multiplex, not all of its films are sufficiently "commercial" enough to receive the multiplex treatment. There is apparently a limit to how wide a release for something like

[35] A24's press notes for *The Lighthouse* also make similar claims to the press notes for *Midsommar* in terms of authorship. The press kit overtly labels Eggers as "one of cinema's most exciting contemporary auteurs" and a "visionary filmmaker" (A24, 2019e, pp. 4-6).

The Lighthouse, which presents as more of an art-house film, can be. While A24 appears willing to allow directors working under its banner to experiment with genre and style, it allocates more of its resources to films which it believes will fare well at the box office. With *The Witch*, the company could craft a marketing campaign that made the film appear as a more conventional horror film, something it was unable to do with *The Lighthouse*.

As we have seen, A24's marketing and distribution choices for its horror properties helped to give mainstream exposure to the elevated horror cycle. The company's U.S. distribution of *The Witch* was a key moment of increased visibility to the elevated horror aesthetic, and this was followed by major studios attempting to market and release elevated horror in a similar way (with varying degrees of success). A24 leading the charge with elevated horror gave the cycle a platform, as well as some important names in Eggers and Aster. At the same time, A24's choices as a distributor affect which of its elevated horror films receive the most exposure. Statements in the press, like the one from Harmony Korine which opens this chapter, might portray A24 as a company that is more focused on the art than the commerce of cinema, and this makes for good publicity. But the truth of the matter is that A24, just like any other studio, makes decisions that will help itself as a business and a brand. Its decisions as to what films are marketable to a wide audience impact those films' potential. Films like *The Witch* and *Hereditary* were groomed for positive word of mouth at film festivals before being afforded the possibility for blockbuster success with large theatrical releases. *The Lighthouse*, meanwhile, was given a "specialty box office" release, and, despite earning a

massive $52,471 per-screen average on eight screens during its first weekend (Ramos, 2019), it never expanded beyond 1,000 theaters.

At the end of the decade, A24 remained the dominant distributor for elevated horror and one of the only companies bringing those films to the multiplex. Its corporate decision-making held a high degree of influence on how elevated horror was perceived by mainstream moviegoers and the press.[36] Thus, an A24 horror film's ability to experiment with genre while also impacting the broader cultural conversation around elevated horror is shaped in part by the company's confidence in that film's financial prospects. While both *Midsommar* and *The Lighthouse* were sold by A24 as ambitious, auteur-driven genre films, the company showed more confidence that *Midsommar* could be packaged as something which could have mainstream success. The genre experimentation within *Midsommar*, then, had a greater opportunity to impact the elevated horror cycle than that of *The Lighthouse.*

Midsommar, more so than *The Lighthouse*, was treated in the press as the next big elevated horror film. What is most interesting about the rhetoric within the press, though, is that the distinctive genre hybridity that tempered the serious tone of elevated horror and was highlighted in many critics' reviews was not mentioned in pieces which assessed the film's relationship to the elevated horror cycle. Scout Tafoya's takedown of elevated horror is a good example of this. His piece centered *Midsommar* as a "focal point" in a "semiotic war" within the horror genre and described the film as Aster's attempt to

[36] Outside of niche film blogs covering horror, most publications centered their discussions of elevated horror on theatrically-released films.

convince the viewer to "forget the tradition of horror [to which the film] belongs" (2019). In contrast to the critics who saw *Midsommar* as cleverly playing with the conventions which underlie the horror genre, Tafoya reads Aster's genre play as an attempted "escape" from the history of horror as a means of presenting the film as "something better than horror" (2019). Thus, Tafoya saw *Midsommar* as Aster taking genre very seriously and used it as a further example of how elevated horror is pretentious and "self-important" (2019).

In David Church's account of the cycle, which he refers to as "post-horror" (an alternative moniker of "elevated horror"), he makes the case that these films' approach to themes of grief, trauma, and gaslighting evoke "discomfort in viewers for whom these films may feel less like entertaining diversions than painfully recognizable emotional scenarios" (2021, p. 102). Church references the distinct lack of "fun" that these films produce when compared to other horror films which prioritize shock and disgust (2021, p. 69). Through this framing, Church also situates *Midsommar* as a discomforting film with weighty emotional and psychological themes while only mentioning in passing the aspects of the film which play as more humorous and self-aware.

CONCLUSION

Despite its approach to genre hybridity differing from previous films in the elevated horror cycle, and those elements of hybridity being referenced in numerous reviews for the film, *Midsommar* was grouped into the criticism that claimed the cycle was overly self-serious in an attempt to be gauged as more artistically accomplished than

other horror cinema. While I would argue that both *Midsommar* and *The Lighthouse* were presenting something slightly different generically than the elevated horror films made prior to 2019, the discourse surrounding the cycle has stopped shy of acknowledging the two films as departures.

All the same, A24 afforded directors like Aster and Eggers the space to produce projects which critics called "audacious" and which experiment with the genre hybridity of elevated horror, opening up the possibility for change within the cycle. A24 is not attached to Eggers' forthcoming film *The Northman*—a co-production between New Regency Productions and Focus Features that will be distributed domestically by Focus Features (Sharf, 2020). But it will be distributing Aster's third feature, *Disappointment Blvd.,* which Aster has described as a four-hour-long "nightmare comedy" (Lattanzio, 2020). Aster's penchant for mixing dark comedy with psychological horror does not appear to be something that he is giving up as he grows in popularity as a horror director, and his approach to genre will certainly continue to inform the elevated horror cycle moving forward.

With *Midsommar,* Aster presented an evolution of elevated horror by eliminating some of the art-house preoccupations that came to typify the cycle's corpus and which have been a major talking point for the cycle's most vocal critics. Given that a cycle only maintains a foothold within the industry so long as there is a vested interest in its films by audiences (Klein, 2011, pp. 8-9), the shift in the generic presentation of elevated horror in *Midsommar* presents the possibility for the cycle to transform into something that could assuage these critics' concerns and provide the cycle with more mainstream appeal.

Conversely, *Midsommar* may prove to be an outlier. With the novel Coronavirus pandemic disrupting film distribution and exhibition in 2020-21, few elevated horror films have been released (as of this writing). However, two that have, *Relic* (d. James, 2020) and *Saint Maud* (d. Glass, 2021), offer restrained narratives about trauma and psychological grief within an elevated horror aesthetic, with neither straying too far from the weighty themes and art-house preoccupations of the cycle.

With theaters in a precarious state during the pandemic, A24 leaned into streaming for some of its releases, while delaying some high-profile releases like *The Green Knight* (d. Lowery) and *Zola* (d. Bravo) to summer 2021. It handled *Minari* (d. Chung, 2021) with a premium VOD release during the 2021 awards season, and it made an eight-figure deal with Epix for exclusive rights to stream *Saint Maud* (D'Alessandro, 2021). The company is also in pre-production on a slasher film called *Bodies, Bodies, Bodies*. The film is being helmed by a director with a prestige pedigree in Halina Reijn, whose debut feature *Instinct* (2019) was selected as Denmark's entry into the Best International Feature Film category at the 2020 Academy Awards (Kroll, 2021). As such, there is a strong possibility that it will fit into the elevated horror corpus.

Another upcoming film from A24 is *False Positive*, the feature debut from John Lee which is scheduled to release on Hulu in June 2021 (Leishman, 2021). Co-written by and starring Ilana Glazer, the film is about a woman named Lucy who becomes pregnant after seeing a fertility doctor. Lucy "begins to notice something sinister" about the doctor and the nature of her pregnancy (D'Alessandro, 2020). This premise contains shades of *Rosemary's Baby*, to which films of the elevated horror cycle are often compared. *False*

Positive also reportedly sports heavy themes regarding mental health and is a genre-hybrid horror film (Cadenas, 2021), making it another potential elevated horror release from A24. It is clear that, as A24 weathers the effects of the pandemic, it continues to rely on the distribution of elevated horror films from burgeoning auteurs. And as long as this remains the case, the cycle will likely remain a central part of the horror discourse.

Conclusion

I have traced two parallel histories with this study: the development of A24 as a company and a brand from 2012 to 2020, and the related development of the elevated horror cycle. By following the distribution of A24 horror films from the beginning with *Under the Skin*, we see the growing pains the company experienced in executing its business model. That film's marketing failed to entice the mainstream audience as A24 had hoped, and it even struggled to appeal to the indie niche market, resulting in a substantial financial failure. This marketing strategy, however, which reconfigured the film's generic elements to sell the film as a more traditional horror piece, worked more effectively with subsequent films *The Witch, Hereditary*, and *Midsommar*. As the elevated horror trend grew in popularity—in no small part due to the success of *The Witch*—A24 became central to the discourse around the cycle. The growing prestige associated with A24's brand, alongside the company's ambitious theatrical release strategy, provided elevated horror a crucial level of cultural exposure.

The company has released content in other genres beyond horror, and these releases also function as part of A24's house style. Films like *Spring Breakers* (d. Korine, 2012), *The Bling Ring* (d. Coppola, 2013), *Free Fire* (d. Wheatley, 2016), *Good Time* (d. Safdie and Safdie, 2017), and *Uncut Gems* (d. Safdie and Safdie, 2019) were indie takes on the crime genre. The company has also distributed science fiction dramas which could be considered "elevated—" *Enemy* (d. Villeneuve, 2013), *Ex Machina* (d. Garland, 2014), and *High Life* (d. Denis, 2018). It has even ventured into punk exploitation cinema

with *Green Room* (d. Saulnier, 2015). Clearly, A24 has made genre an integral facet of its brand.

As a brand-focused independent emerging in the 2010s, A24 has played a pivotal role in the evolution of American independent cinema. The late-2000s was a period when independence was pushed once again to the margins, having moved "away from the conglomerated majors' specialty film divisions and standalone superpowers such as Lionsgate to artisanal companies … many of whom tried to exploit new and emerging approaches to distribution" (Tzioumakis, 2017, p. 259). Companies like A24 and Neon moved to fill the gap in American independent cinema left by the decline of Indiewood, and they both have done so with an emphasis on corporate authorship and branding.

Corporate authorship has been theorized by scholars such as Jerome Christensen, who argues that "making a consumer into a customer involves the establishment of a connection to the corporation" (2011, p. 10), and J.D. Connor in *The Studios after the Studios* investigates the extent to which films are allegories for the business which created them (2015, p. 5). More specifically, a volume like *MTM: 'Quality Television'* (eds. Feuer, Kerr, and Vahimagi) examines the links between corporate identity, house styles, and the perception of "quality" content. A24, quite clearly, fits into this discourse. For its niche audience, the A24 logo has become a marker for quality independent film—a connection has been made between company and consumer that attributes the corporate author as a trustworthy name in cinema. With its flowery logo preceding the marketing for *Midsommar,* the company even engaged in what Connor refers to as logorrhea—which is to say, the "bleeding" of studio logo and film narrative emblematic of corporate

authorship (2015, pp. 19-21). By examining A24's branding practices, I have attempted to place the company directly into this conversation.

By focusing on A24, this project provides one perspective from which to analyze the elevated horror cycle. Of course, there are other angles which future research can take. Primarily, and as noted in the Introduction, the global perspective of the elevated horror cycle is worthy of further study. In organizing this study around a U.S. distributor, my discussion of non-U.S. productions has necessarily been kept to a minimum. *Under the Skin*, a product of the United Kingdom, is the exception, and its acquisition for U.S. distribution by A24 allowed for an analysis of the marketing employed by a non-U.S. company in StudioCanal. However, this analysis dealt primarily with A24's marketing and branding practices. More could be said about the film's complicated transnationality—it is a film set and shot in Scotland from a British writer-director, adapted from a novel by a Dutch-born author who lives in Scotland, and starring a Hollywood A-lister. The ways in which these varied national identities and market interests manifest within the film text are broached in Connor's brief analysis in *Jump Cut* (2016), and this could be explored further.

Several films in the elevated horror cycle which have been produced outside the U.S. are worth examining in detail, notably *Goodnight Mommy* (d. Fiala & Franz, Austria, 2015), *The Wailing* (d. Na, South Korea, 2016), *Raw* (d. Ducournau, France, 2017), and *Tigers are Not Afraid* (d. Lopez, Mexico, 2019). These films warrant further analysis within their relevant national contexts. This work has already been initiated in the case of *The Wailing*, a film which received worldwide critical acclaim and was the

seventh highest-grossing film of 2016 in South Korea at $45 million USD (Box Office Mojo).[37] It was nominated for Best Film at the two most prestigious South Korean film awards, the Grand Bell Awards and the Blue Dragon Awards, and Na Hong-jin won the Blue Dragon for Best Director. Luisa Hyojin Koo has written about the film's relationship to South Korean national identity, particularly as it relates to a history of Japanese colonialism in the country which bred a culture of hypermasculinity (2019).

The Wailing was one in a line of genre films coming out of South Korea's rapidly developing film industry. As Darcy Paquet puts it, the New Korean Cinema that emerged out of the political upheaval of the late-1980s grew "strong enough [by the mid-2000s] to compete with, and even out-perform, Hollywood films in its home market" (2009, p. 4). The genre cinema of filmmakers like Park Chan-wook, Kim Jee-woon, and Bong Joon-ho were particularly influential in this market shift given their blend of commercial and film festival appeal (Paquet, 2009, pp. 93-94). The 2010s evidenced a continued emphasis on genre cinema in the success of South Korea's film industry. *The Wailing* was a contribution to both this national industry and the elevated horror cycle, making it a dynamic case study.

Ducournau's *Raw* is a similar case, in that its subject matter echoes that of the New French Extremity, which spanned roughly from the 1990s to the end of the 2000s.[38] Specifically, it shares commonalities with the cannibal narrative of Claire Denis' *Trouble Every Day* (2001). *Raw* has been critically examined through psychoanalytic (Watson,

[37] South Korea's number-one grossing film of that year was another horror film, *Train to Busan* (d. Lee).
[38] Alexandra West argues that the New French Extremity, like the New Korean Cinema, was a politically motivated cinema pushing back against a conservative political regime (2016).

2020) and gender studies (Dooley, 2019) lenses, but not much has been said of its inclusion in the elevated horror corpus. The differing ways in which the films of the elevated horror cycle engage with their respective national cinemas is, I believe, a fruitful avenue for future research. Similarly, it is worth looking at the transnational dimension of these films and how they exist as part of a global film industry.

It is also worth noting here the other studios which distributed elevated horror. I have briefly discussed Blumhouse and its contribution to the cycle, *Get Out.* While the company has not released other elevated horror since that film, it is perhaps worth examining the way in which elevated horror functions differently in Blumhouse's business model when compared to A24. Blumhouse's brand clearly diverges from A24's, in that it is notably less prestige oriented and focuses mainly on low-budget commercial horror. The situation of *Get Out* within this brand, as well as Jordan Peele's relationship to the company, would make for an intriguing case. Moreover, there has not been a significant study to date of Blumhouse's market strategy. Being that Blumhouse is an independent company which has produced a number of successful horror blockbusters—e.g., the *Paranormal Activity* and *The Purge* franchises, *Split* (d. Shyamalan, 2016), *Halloween* (d. Green, 2018)—its impact on contemporary horror cinema has been considerable.

IFC Midnight, the genre division of IFC Films, is similarly notable in terms of its branding. It has released a small selection of horror films with an art-house aesthetic, the most recent being *Relic* in 2021. But the company takes a broad approach to horror, releasing content in a variety of subgenres such as teen screams (*#Horror* [d. Subkoff,

2015]) and hard-R body horror films (*Cabin Fever* [d. Zariwny, 2016], *Contracted* [d. England, 2013]). IFC attached itself early to the VOD trend (Hildebrand, 2010, pp. 24-28), with most of its horror films not seeing theatrical release—another distribution strategy which diverges from that of A24.

There are elements of A24's model which also could be explored in future research. The independent company was a crucial facet of American independent cinema in the 2010s. A24's marketing and distribution strategies attempt to appeal to both its "indie taste culture" niche and to the mainstream moviegoer. In looking at how the company expanded the audience for the elevated horror cycle, this project has focused mainly on its appeals to the mainstream. Further research could explore the processes through which A24 has cultivated its niche audience. These processes include targeted social media marketing and the sale of collectible products associated with its films. A24's online shop sells limited edition memorabilia clearly geared to the more intense fans of the company's films. Products include a tabletop roleplaying game associated with the fantasy film *The Green Knight* ($35), a facial hair grooming kit modeled on iconography from *The Lighthouse* ($42), and a gold-plated replica of the "blinged-out" Furby toy from *Uncut Gems* ($250) (A24). These are a brand of unique, artisanal products which go beyond the usual film merchandising (i.e., posters) to appeal to a narrower fanbase. It would be worthwhile to examine A24's niche branding practices in more depth, particularly in relation to the practices of other contemporary independents.

One could also look at the ways in which A24 has diversified its business and how that affects its brand. I touched briefly on the streaming and VOD deals A24 has

made, including those with DirecTV, HBO, and Apple. While this project has focused mainly on theatrical exhibition, A24 is moving increasingly into the streaming space. The company has also produced a number of television projects like *Ramy* (2019-) and *Moonbase 8* (2020). This non-theatrical content lies largely outside the scope of my study; nevertheless, it is an integral and developing component of A24's business which should be explored further.

Over time, the elevated horror cycle will necessarily fade away and new cycles of horror will emerge. In terms of genre cycle analysis, this study is restricted by the fact that the elevated horror trend is still in progress. The historical perspective on horror cinema will benefit, I believe, from research in the future which will place the elevated horror cycle in conversation with subsequent cycles (in a similar way to what I attempt to do in the Introduction by placing the neo-grindhouse cycle of the 2000s in conversation with both elevated horror and blockbuster horror of the 2010s). The impact of A24 on American independent cinema, too, will only be properly assessed in retrospect. The company has only been in operation for nine years, and it shows no signs of slowing down, with six films slated for release in 2021—including two elevated horror films, *Saint Maud* (d. Rose) and *False Positive* (d. Lee). If past is prelude, both American independent cinema and horror cinema are likely to be impacted by A24 as we head into the 2020s.

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